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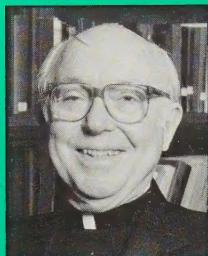


Becoming a New Creation



The Danger in Visions

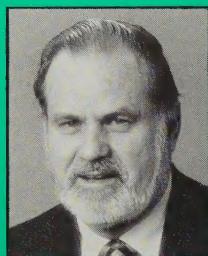
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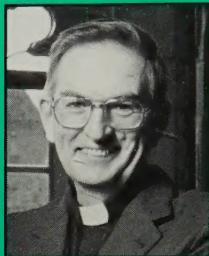
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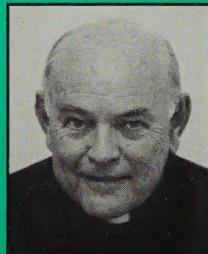
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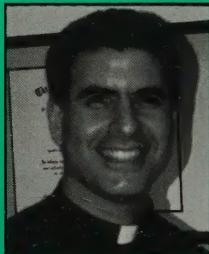
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EDITOR'S PAGE

SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS DESERVE THANKS

F

Fortune magazine isn't one of the places I usually look for an update on what the Holy Spirit is currently doing to enrich the spiritual lives of God's loved ones. But the huge lettering on the front cover of its July issue, calling attention to an article titled "God and Business: The Surprising Quest for Spiritual Renewal in the American Workplace," caught my eye and led me to an insight that I feel deserves to be shared with our HUMAN DEVELOPMENT readers.

The article, written by Marc Gunther and highlighting the rapid increase in the popularity of spirituality among leaders in the world of business, notes that just two years ago, when a Gallup Poll asked Americans if they feel a need to experience spiritual growth, 78 percent answered in the affirmative. (Five years earlier, a similar study drew only a 20 percent positive reply). In the 1999 survey, nearly half of those questioned said they'd had occasion to talk about their faith with someone in their workplace during the past 24 hours. Gunther also quotes the Book Industry Study Group's recent report that "sales of Bibles and prayer books, inspirational volumes, and books about philosophy and Eastern religions are growing faster than any other category." The *Fortune* article presents numerous examples of the prominent role spirituality has come to play in the workplace lives of high-level executives.

The insight I mentioned above can easily be derived from Gunther's observation that "while the movement to bring spirituality to work has spawned countless books and conferences, . . . no author, guru, clergyman, or celebrity CEO has emerged as its

leader. It's very much a grassroots affair." What impresses me about this statement, along with the many examples Gunther offers, is that people are teaching each other and learning from each other to understand and put into practice the principles and skills related to the realm of the spiritual. Exchange of personal experience characterizes the movement; there is no top-down dogmatic transmission.

For example, Jose Zeilstra, a J.P. Morgan Chase vice president dealing with strategy, leadership, and productivity issues, teaches her professional peers what she has learned from personal spiritual experience: that "there is no higher calling than to serve God, and that does not mean only within the church. Ultimately, your life, whether it's work, family or friends, is part of a larger plan . . . When you ask how you bring God into your work, it's not by getting caught up in making money or achieving power so that they become your gods."

Another example cited in *Fortune* is the spirituality of Thomas Crisman, a patent attorney with a big corporate law firm in Dallas, who has traveled to India for a month every year since 1980 to make a retreat involving Buddhist meditation. He has learned, with the help of his mentors there, that such retreats "restore people to a natural state, filled with love and compassion." Crisman tells his colleagues, "It's like scrubbing the paint off the outside of the light bulb and letting the light shine through."

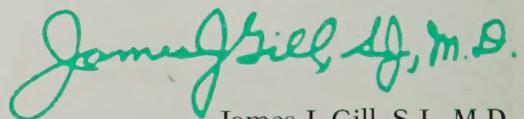
Another example from among the many Gunther presents is that of Ricardo Levy, founder of the remarkably successful pharmaceutical and energy company Catalytica, who learned a way to make major business decisions while participating in a program for business leaders at Santa Clara University in California. The technique—an application of the ancient Christian process known as spiritual discernment—

was taught to Levy by specialists in management who had integrated spirituality into their own ways of doing business successfully. Now he teaches others to discover the will of God through discerned decision making—"not a tool taught in many business schools these days," Gunther comments.

A somewhat disturbing element in the *Fortune* article is the way that most of the business leaders quoted there—"to avoid tripping over dogma," explains Gunther—speak exclusively of "spirituality" and "meaning," not about religion and God. He notes that a survey of business executives found that more than 60 percent had positive feelings about "spirituality," accompanied by a negative view of "religion."

That article has reminded me to thank God for the spirituality shared with countless thousands of us by our own spiritual directors. They unselfishly devote their time, talents, and ministry to passing along for

our benefit the fruits of their own training and experience. How can we ever adequately thank them for teaching us to pray, to find God in all things, to make decisions in line with God's will, to recognize and cherish the life of the Trinity within us, and to use our minds and hearts to grow in knowledge and love of our Lord by contemplating the scriptures? They help us to find meaning in the work we do. But more than that, they talk with us about God and religion in conversations that are gifts beyond all pricing. These are our God-sent sisters and brothers who so generously walk alongside and guide us—all the way home.



James J. Gill, S.J., M.D.
Editor-in-Chief

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* * *

For more information, please see the back cover of this issue

Becoming a New Creation

Joel Giallanza, C.S.C.

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. (2 Cor. 5:17)

New creation, everything new—Is this just a pious thought, or is it a tough process? Saint Paul would probably be indignant if the Corinthians, or anyone else for that matter, had interpreted his words as merely a nice idea to muse about at leisure. For Paul, there is always work to be done—hard work. Growth in our life's journey is never at an end; there are new roads to take, new pathways to explore, new decisions to make. It is a tough process.

Saint Paul's words are particularly challenging if we read them from the perspective of our continuing spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and relational growth and development. Yet such growth and development do involve a process that can lead us toward becoming a "new creation." This calls for more than a minor adjustment of some attitude or activity in our life; "everything" has to become new or, inevitably, there will be some remnant of old patterns that can solidify into barriers without passageways. This is both the richness and the rigor of Paul's image of "new creation," especially when applied to any formative process that nurtures personal growth and development.

This image is richer than the often-used term *renewal*. We renew subscriptions, prescriptions, and

licenses; enhancing the quality of our life warrants another description. Similarly inadequate is the sometimes used variation *renovation*. We renovate buildings, furniture, and wardrobes; setting a course for the direction of our life demands more sophistication. Human life is the summit of God's creative activity. "New creation" serves well as an image for any process by which we take up serious and sincere efforts for human growth and development.

Those efforts should include three means that are inseparable from our maturation and formation. First, self-knowledge: the effectiveness of our efforts should lead us to a realistic assessment of our capabilities and thus our limitations. The alternative is to live with a pretense that refuses to look in the mirror at who we are. Second, self-acceptance: we must establish clear goals that are achievable in light of our capabilities and limitations. The alternative is the endless frustration of being blocked each time we try to move toward what we want. Third, self-initiative: we must make the decisions and take the directions to move toward the goals we have established. The alternative is the discouragement of waiting for something to happen that truly cannot happen because the process advances by what we do.

This article focuses on a process for furthering personal growth and development, for becoming this new creation in our life. The paradigm of creation, which serves as the framework for that process, is the most ancient in the Judeo-Christian tradition; it

appears as a story in the biblical book of Genesis. The focus here will be on the first three days of the seven presented in the story.

THE CREATION STORY

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. When the earth was formless and void, and when darkness was over the surface of the deep, the very essence of God was pulsating over the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good; and God distinguished the light from the darkness. And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. There was evening and there was morning, one day. Then God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. God called the expanse heaven. There was evening and there was morning, a second day. Then God said, "Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let the earth produce growing things, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit after their kind, with seed in them, on the earth"; and it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit, with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a third day. (Genesis 1:1-13)

What follows is a reflection on what this paradigm can teach us about our continuing maturation and formation. These "three days" can shed some light on what is truly the work of a lifetime.

IN THE BEGINNING

The process has to begin at some point, at some time. This story begins, as does growth and development, by taking note of the present situation. Two points from the opening scene of the story serve as a prelude to the entire process.

First, creation is God's work; it unfolds by God's initiative. So too is the new creation we seek to live and to be, but this is no sanction for passivity. We cannot watch our own life from the sidelines and realistically expect that growth and development will evolve on their own. God's work urges us to take action. In using the personal resources at our disposal, our gifts and skills, we strive to coordinate them with God's grace. However extensive and sophisticated those resources may be, we must see them and use them within the broader context of God's creative activity, within our relationship to God. An enclosed self-

reliance will sabotage the process at its very inception.

Second, the process begins with an energy, a stirring, a pulsating presence that signals that something is going on, drawing our attention, and impelling us to respond. Initially, we may not know the nature and content and extent of what is happening, since "darkness" envelops it. However, we probably can identify the general area of life in which this initial stirring is taking place. We may know, by our intuition or through information from others, toward which dimension of our life, or combination of dimensions, our attention should be directed.

These two points form a single weaving. We will need God's continuing and graced work in responding to whatever is pulsating within us. And our response will heighten our sensitivity to God's presence and activity within and around us. This weaving of God's work and our response is the foundation upon which we will build the "new creation" we are challenged to become and called to be.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Light is the first of all created things. This oldest member of creation is so familiar to us that we usually take it for granted. It's just there. As we go through our daily routines and responsibilities, we may not even be regularly aware of light. However, if it is taken away at a critical or inconvenient moment, it quickly becomes a preoccupation, and we can expend much time and energy—not to mention patience—on reestablishing its presence and function. We need light for the process of our growth and development. This is the first day, this is the day of self-knowledge, the day to shine light on who we are. The particular usefulness of this light is threefold.

First, light enables us to see, to observe, to examine. There is always some available light we can use to explore who we are. If we choose not to use that light, then the process need not advance any further. Admittedly, the available light may not be consistently bright and intense; sometimes it may be merely the dark light of faith or intuition. Nevertheless, we can hasten or hinder our progress, depending on how we use the light. If we are not willing to look closely at the stirring of our inner life, then the process of our growth and development will stumble blindly, however brilliant the light shining upon it. We need both light and willingness for the work to be done.

Second, light is pervasive; it can reach all the corners, cracks, and crevices of our life, and it discloses everything without discrimination. Having seen who we are in this light, now we can decide what we want and in which direction we want to move. We can

move toward a determination that responds and pursues, or toward a denial that refuses and pretends. At times it is difficult to formulate a realistic perspective of our present life situation because of a confusion or pain or anger that has not yet healed. Accepting this situation and determining what we want can appear to be insurmountable obstacles. Seeking support and accompaniment from a spiritual director, counselor, formator, or other companion can be especially wise and prudent at such times. Denial, refusal, and pretense may beckon us as the easier paths, but their results will eventually diminish and disappear altogether in the face of truth.

Third, light displays shadows; it places before us those areas of life that are not yet clearly focused or fully considered. We may not be able to identify the content of those shadows, and we may be uncertain in terms of our desire to do so. Still, light reveals their presence. It remains for us to decide what we will do. Once the shadows are displayed, once we have seen them, we cannot simply and summarily dismiss them. Shadows must be taken into account as part of who we are and what we want. Only then can we formulate the strategies we will use in this process of re-creation. We might not relish looking at the shadows, let alone directing the light to disperse them, thus revealing their content; nevertheless, they are a definite component within the truth of our life.

Once the stirring within us begins, once God's work is under way, it is for us to see it, embrace it, and decide how to respond. The light to do so will be available and accessible if we seek it. Several sources can provide that light: spiritual directors, counselors, formators, other mentors on our journey in life, workshops, retreats, and our own reading and reflection. If we do not use the light as a means to grow in self-knowledge, taking into view the whole of our life, shadows and all, then growth and development will shrivel from lack of priority. Self-knowledge is work, and we may not always appreciate what its light reveals to us about ourselves. If we choose to close the eyes of our minds and hearts to the truth of who we are, with all its shadings, then we will not alter that truth as much as make it more difficult to deal with once we do open our eyes and look and see.

LET THERE BE AN EXPANSE

In the Genesis story, light reveals an indiscriminate mass of waters. There is no vantage point from which to determine where or how to begin the work that must be done. Light is a welcome guest; nevertheless, the reality it now displays can be overwhelming. With the new dawn, God makes some working space by separating the parts of these waters from one another;

other; an expanse appears. So too must we make a working space for our maturation and formation. This is the second day; this is the day of self-acceptance; this is the day to determine what we want in light of what we see. Self-acceptance is not merely a casual proclamation that we acknowledge and affirm what the light has revealed. It calls us to a deeper probing of that revelation.

First, we must distinguish the various pieces of information we have learned and are learning through self-knowledge. Only by looking closely and carefully at the multifaceted dimensions of our life can we recognize who we are, perceive the reality of it all, and accept it as the base from which we can determine what we want. The light of self-knowledge may have shown us a mass of issues we need to address, hurts we want to heal, and hopes we long to realize. By distinguishing them one from another, we can identify the appropriate means to ensure that they will be neither neglected nor forgotten.

Second, we must discern which issues, hurts, and hopes are primary and which are subsidiary. We must prioritize them. In our enthusiasm and by our expectation, we may think we can take up everything at the same time. Usually, and very quickly, we discover that "everything" hands us far too many items to juggle at once. And, as with juggling, we will be compelled to give a minimal amount of attention to each item; inevitably, some issue or hurt or hope will be dropped. Then the issue lies fallow, the hurt festers, the hope fades. Wisdom is in the balanced approach of discerning what can be done and what must be done, realistically and effectively, with the resources we can call upon for assistance and insight and support.

Third, we must decide and plan what we will do. Self-acceptance does not emerge by spontaneous generation, nor is it sustained on automatic pilot. Decisions must accompany the distinctions we have made and the discernment we have completed. Otherwise, nothing will advance. Those decisions must include concrete strategies for accomplishing what we say we want to do. Assuredly, decisions and plans will need some refinements along the way toward implementation. That is but a healthy reminder that we are human and especially that any process for personal growth and development is designed to serve us. Once we become slaves of the process, we add to the indiscriminate mass of material confronting us.

Self-acceptance requires some space, "an expanse in the midst of the waters," so we can separate and see the many dimensions of our life. No, we do not live those dimensions in isolation from one another, precisely because our life is one. There is an essential interdependence and interaction among the spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual,

and relational components of our life. However, we can prioritize. We can turn our attention to one dimension for a time to explore its content and recognize its complexity as a part of who we are and as a basis for formulating what we want. In this, self-acceptance and self-knowledge are intimately linked.

LET THE EARTH PRODUCE GROWING THINGS

With the new dawn comes the solid earth we need for further growth and development. The light of self-knowledge and the expanse of self-acceptance have prepared the way for the “dry land” to appear. This is the fertile soil in which our continuing maturation and formation will take root. But this involves work—sometimes messy work. We must put our hands and hearts into this soil to cultivate it, to make an environment for “growing things.” This is the third day; this is the day of self-initiative; this is the day for doing what we have been preparing to do throughout the process. Self-initiative calls us to several tasks.

First, the dry land needs to be tilled. The material—the issue or hurt or hope that has been brought to light by self-knowledge and recognized through self-acceptance—must now be worked. The assistance and accompaniment of a spiritual director, counselor, formator, or other companion are particularly valuable at this time. Yet we must do the tilling for ourselves; we must work the soil. Those who assist and accompany us can ask questions and provide resources and make suggestions, but we remain the tiller of this soil of our life. Without this tilling, the dry land gradually becomes hardened and barren, unable to sustain any growth. Our willingness to till the soil confirms that our self-knowledge is true and our self-acceptance is genuine.

Second, the tilled land needs to be seeded and nourished. If issues are to be addressed, hurts healed, and hopes realized, then the seeds for what we want to do need to be planted. Those seeds will be very specific strategies for responding to those issues, hurts, and hopes. Our behaviors and attitudes will have to be adjusted in whichever ways will accommodate and facilitate the implementation of those strategies. Once planted, those seeds must be nourished. They must be provided with an environment that will encourage their growth and development. Former and familiar patterns of responding to issues, hurts, and hopes may need to be set aside temporarily or permanently to make room for the new life, the new creation, that is emerging.

Third, the tilled and planted and nourished land needs to be harvested. We must now live with all that has gone before and claim it as our own. This may appear to be such a logical next step that its mention

here is hardly necessary. Yet doubts and uncertainties and questions, however vague, can still haunt us, making us hesitant in taking the next steps. We need not go forward completely alone. Support from a companion on our journey can sharpen our confidence and solidify our conviction in reviewing all that we have done thus far. Now is the time for trust and faith. Now is the time for new life.

Self-initiative is a time for “growing things.” Our fidelity to the way before us, lighted by self-knowledge and opened by self-acceptance, will bear fruit if we take the initiative to cultivate and to live the truth that has been revealed to us. This initiative and cultivation will lead us onto new pathways of embracing the spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and relational dimensions of our life. And this process of cultivation will continue. Various segments within the landscape of our life, inevitably, will need to be tilled and seeded and harvested once again. The quality of our personal maturation and formation is marked by the initiative we take to maintain its vibrancy and vitality.

God said, “Let the earth produce growing things.” The growing things of self-initiative enable us to live who we are, what we want, what we will do. “There was evening and there was morning, a third day.”

THREE DAYS FOR A LIFETIME

The first three days from the Genesis story reflect a paradigm for personal growth and development. Yet the story covers seven days; what of the remaining four? As the story in Genesis evolves, the foundation for everything that comes from God’s creative work is established in the first three days. All else is an expansion and a sophistication and a refinement of what has been completed by the evening of the third day. The light and the expanse and the growing things were necessary even before the creation of humanity.

The parallel is evident. Self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-initiative are three disciplines that span a lifetime. They form a solid foundation upon which personal growth and development are built. Whatever unfolds within the process will be linked to these three disciplines. Indeed, the process will not unfold without them. The process alone could never guide us to living and being that “new creation” about which Saint Paul spoke.

These three disciplines operate interdependently. The material about ourselves that self-knowledge uncovers and observes is made more distinct and sifted by self-acceptance. Self-initiative tills the soil of our personal landscape so that our maturation and formation can commence and continue. As the process advances, self-knowledge is relentless; it reaches and

excavates everywhere within us. Our discernment of the directions to be taken for optimum growth and development is affirmed by self-acceptance. The seed from which the new creation within us can flourish is planted and nourished by self-initiative. The process continues to evolve. The intense light of self-knowledge shows our shadows. The expanse of self-acceptance provides the working space we need to ensure that our progress will not be halted by either those shadows or anything else that may emerge along our pathway. Self-initiative reaps the harvest of continued growth and development, of the growing things within us. These are three days for a lifetime, three disciplines for a new creation.

GOD SAW THAT IS WAS GOOD

Recurring throughout the Genesis creation story is the simple note, "God saw that it was good." The challenge for us is to look over the process of growth and development we have experienced thus far and acknowledge that it is good. The process has probed deeply the reality, and even the images we have, of the spiritual, physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and relational dimensions of our life. Along the way, we have seen and recognized the lights and shadows within ourselves. We have accepted and adopted foreign ways of thinking and behaving to enhance the quality of our life and, by consequence, we have discarded familiar patterns that were discerned to be detrimental. The disciplines of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-initiative provide the material from which the new creation that we can be and are becoming is made by God's word and molded by our work.

That the process is pronounced "good" does not mean that it will have a direct correlation to our affective experience of it. Most spiritual directors, counselors, and formators, after having accompanied someone through such a process, with all its joys and jolts, and then having affirmed the grace and good at work in the person, have heard, "But it doesn't feel all that good just yet." Self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-initiative constitute a process of growth and development that lead us into and through the Paschal Mystery. There will be death, and there will be new life along the way. Saint Paul gives us a glimpse of the journey's end: "Everything old has passed away; everything has become new." This passing away and becoming new are not free of charge; they will cost something in relation to whichever dimension of our life is immediately involved in the process. Hoping for the new creation to flourish within us apart from the cross is untenable. Any attempts to maneuver around experiences of the cross that may emerge will only

lead us on a circuitous detour that inevitably will have to be backtracked so the process can unfold without manipulation.

The goodness of the process does not thereby make it the same for all. Growth and development are not the products of a standardized recipe. The pathways along which our journey takes us will be uniquely our own. The dimensions of our life, with their capacities and limitations, will shape the specific profile, procedure, and pace of the process that will be most beneficial for us. Comparing our experiences with those of others, while possibly providing some insights and ideas for understanding our own maturation and formation, can also generate frustration, disappointment, and discouragement. Not all variances can be compared productively, precisely because they flow from the individuality, personality, and spirituality of each person. In some instances there may be so little common ground that any attempts at comparison will end in futility, thus draining time and energy from the movement of our own process. The assistance and accompaniment of a spiritual director, counselor, or formator can guide us in tapping the power of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-initiative for discovering the truth of ourselves and for determining the directions we will take to build the new creation we can become.

A NEW CREATION

"For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." Pious thought or tough process? The new creation is within us. It is for us to decide if we will take up the process of growth and development by which we can know and nurture and live that new creation. If we do nothing more than think about it, that new creation will lie forever dormant. Our fidelity and integrity in response to the challenges placed before us by self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-initiative give us the vision to see the new creation emerging within our life. And as we see that everything has become and is yet becoming new, we will look with confidence at the process and proclaim, "Indeed, it is very good."



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A Christmas Miracle for Therese of Lisieux

Joseph F. Schmidt, F.S.C.

Just before her fourteenth birthday, Therese had an experience that she later described as her “complete conversion.” The phrase sometimes refers to a change of religious affiliation or to having newly “found” Jesus, but obviously, Therese had experienced neither of these. What, then, could she have meant?

Ordinarily, in usual Christian moral usage, the term “conversion” refers to a movement away from a state of serious and mortal sin to a state of personal conformity to God’s will—a change so fundamental that one’s whole life has been transformed. In that sense, would Therese have needed a conversion? Could it be that Therese understood her experience on that Christmas night to have fundamentally changed her life? Therese believed that she had never denied God anything, even from a very early age. She was rarely unaware of God’s presence. Even in describing her state before her complete conversion, Therese speaks of “imperfections of childhood” and a “terrible fault,” but not mortal or serious sin. Later, when Therese was in Carmel, her confessor, Father Almire Pichon, would assure her that she had never committed a serious sin. From Father Pichon’s point of view, Therese never needed a conversion. Was Therese simply exaggerating when she spoke of her experience as a complete conversion? Or could Therese in retrospect

have believed that her early life had needed a complete change of orientation?

The external details of Therese’s conversion are without drama. As she herself describes them, they are trivial. Her father, a key player in the conversion story, seems not to have noticed anything at all unusual. Celine, Therese’s sister, was also present at the scene of Therese’s conversion. She, however, was sensitive to the inner dynamics of Therese’s heart and did notice a profound change in Therese. In fact, Celine was amazed: “I witnessed the sudden change myself, and I thought I was dreaming when, for the first time, I saw her completely control herself in a disappointment that would previously have left her desolate.” Therese, in recounting the story herself, adds some details of her inner thoughts and sentiments. The family had just returned home from Midnight Mass on Christmas Day:

God would have to work a little miracle to make me grow up in an instant, and this miracle He performed on that unforgettable Christmas day. . . . It was December 25, 1886, that I received the grace of leaving my childhood, in a word, grace of my complete conversion. We had come back from Midnight Mass where I had the happiness of receiving the strong and powerful God. Upon arriving at Les Buissonnets, I used to love to take my shoes from the chimney-corner and examine the presents in

them; this old custom had given us so much joy in our youth that Celine wanted to continue treating me as a baby since I was the youngest in the family. Papa had always loved to see my happiness and listen to my cries of delight as I drew each surprise from the *magic shoes*, and my dear King's gaiety increased my own happiness very much. Jesus desired to show me that I was to give up the defects of my childhood and so He withdrew its innocent pleasures. He permitted Papa, tired out after the Midnight Mass, to experience annoyance when seeing my shoes at the fireplace, and that he speak these words which pierced my heart: "Well, fortunately this will be the last year!" I was going upstairs at the time, to remove my hat, and Celine, knowing how sensitive I was and seeing the tears already glistening in my eyes, wanted to cry too, for she loved me very much and understood my grief. She said: "Oh, Therese, don't go downstairs; it would cause you too much grief to look at your slippers right now!" But Therese was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart! Forcing back my tears, I descended the stairs rapidly, controlling the poundings of my heart, I took my slippers and placed them in front of Papa, and withdrew all the objects joyfully. I had the happy appearance of a queen. Having regained his own cheerfulness, Papa was laughing. Celine believed it was all a *dream!* Fortunately, it was a sweet reality; Therese had discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half, and she was to preserve it forever! (Clarke, *Story of a Soul*, p. 97)

AMBIGUITY OF MOTIVES

Throughout her early years, before her conversion, Therese had made her way through life by being a good child, an obedient child, and in particular a child who could please and charm others. Therese found much of her happiness and consolation in making others happy. Her delight in her relationship with her father came from her ability to please her "King": "Papa had always loved to see my happiness and listen to my cries of delight . . . and my dear King's gaiety increased my own happiness very much." Therese was so much into a style of pleasing others that, as she herself noted, she "appeared to have no will but that of others, and this caused certain people . . . to say [she] had a weak character."

Therese experienced herself as "weak" precisely and especially in the area of her inability to manage her emotions, particularly in her attitude of attempting to please others. Further, she experienced this weakness as being in conflict with her desire to practice virtue: "I had a great desire, it is true, to practice virtue, but I went about it in a strange way."

Therese describes particulars of trying "to practice virtue." They are the experiences of a 13-year-old and so seem trivial, but for the teenage Therese, in

her precocious awareness of her own inner life, these trivial experiences were early warning signals of the path of life she was beginning to follow. Therese knew at some level that a deviation of only a slight degree from her true path at an early stage in the journey would mean a large discrepancy at the final point of arrival:

Being the youngest in the family, I wasn't accustomed to doing things for myself. Celine tidied up the room in which we slept, and I myself didn't do any housework whatsoever. After Marie's entrance into Carmel, it sometimes happened that I tried to make up the bed to please God, or else in the evening, when Celine was away, I'd bring in her plants. But as I already said, it was for *God alone* I was doing these things and should not have expected any *thanks* from creatures. Alas it was just the opposite.

Therese sensed that her motivation was amiss. She began to see that perhaps her reason for doing these little chores was not simply "*God alone*" but included at least a portion of trying to please others. Therese suspected as much when she noticed further that "if Celine was unfortunate enough not to seem happy or surprised because of these little services, I became unhappy and proved it by my tears."

In her description of herself before her Christmas conversion, Therese often refers to her capacity to cry "at the least thing," writing "I was really unbearable because of my extreme touchiness." This characteristic distressed her deeply and eventually warned her that this weakness was a symptom of a serious personal flaw.

EXCESSIVE FEELINGS

In her awareness of the excess of her feelings and the extremeness of her reactions, Therese understood the real problem. She was being overcome by her feelings: the feeling of needing to please others, the feeling of wanting to be a good child, and all the other emotions and self-expectations, as well as elements of self-image that constellated to form this pattern that she recognized as not being true to herself. She wanted to please others so others would affirm her. The pattern was becoming entrenched in her heart and was compromising her real desire to please "*God alone*."

Therese originally believed that her doing a bit of housework reflected a desire to practice virtue. When Therese failed to be noticed by Celine or to be confirmed in her feelings of trying to please Celine, she was pushed by these unrequited feelings into "extreme touchiness." Therese noticed a pattern in herself and so generalized, "if I happened to cause

Therese needed a miraculous event to change her because she experienced herself as powerless in the face of her feelings

anyone I loved some little trouble [i.e., if she failed to please them], even unwittingly [i.e., even without the malicious intent that might have made her feelings of grief and distress reasonable], instead of forgetting about it [i.e., being reasonable and not "extreme" in her reaction] and not crying, which made matters worse [crying got the attention of others, who then either pitied her or scolded her; in either case, it fed into her pattern of needing more and more recognition from others and feeling sure that she could, with more effort, please others], I cried like a Magdalene and then when I began to cheer up, I'd begin to cry again for having cried."

Therese noticed that her need to please others and feel affirmed by them was so strong that, on the one hand, it contaminated her desire for God alone. On the other hand, if unfulfilled, it moved her to "extreme touchiness," to crying "like a Magdalene," and she was driven into a self-disappointment that prompted her to "cry again for having cried." Therese was in the vicious cycle of a compulsion.

Therese likens herself to a Magdalen. Throughout her story she makes this comparison several times, apparently sensing that in some ways she is similar to Mary Magdalene. Later she would notice that she has a special love for Jesus and that Jesus has a special love for her, not unlike the special relationship between Jesus and Magdalene. But Therese believed, with the common opinion of the time, that Magdalene was a victim of her emotions, and that Magdalene had sold her soul by pleasing others promiscuously in order to satisfy her need to be loved and affirmed. Therese may have believed she herself could

also have sold her own soul. At the very least, Therese recognized that she was moving in the wrong path by allowing her feelings to manipulate her.

A few years later, Celine, then a novice in Carmel, also experienced being bullied by her own feelings. In Celine's case, it was the feeling of needing to be better, to be perfect. Celine asked Therese for help. Therese wrote back to Celine: "If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself, you will be for [Jesus] a pleasant place of shelter." Such advice could have come only from someone who had experienced the truth of its wisdom.

In retrospect, Therese speaks of the ten years after her mother's death and before her complete conversion as the most painful period of her life. No doubt part of this pain, perhaps the deepest and most extensive part, was the suffering Therese experienced as a result of her awareness of this pattern of personal compromise. She was suffering the pain of inner conflict; the pain of not being true to herself: the pain of being a victim of her feelings; the trial of being displeasing to herself.

Therese, buffeted by her feelings, experienced herself as a helpless little child, excessively sensitive. She was chronologically almost fourteen, but knew she was an infant emotionally. Therese would eventually make the image of the child in God's arms a central image for her path of holiness, but now, for Therese to act emotionally like a child was inappropriate: "I was really unbearable because of my extreme touchiness . . . I was quite unable to correct this terrible fault." That she had feelings, Therese never considered a fault; that she would be a victim of feelings that blocked her desire "to practice virtue . . . for God alone," she saw as a "terrible fault."

The terror of the fault may have lain in Therese's beliefs about what it had done to Magdalene. Therese saw Magdalene as compromised by the power of her feelings and imagined that Magdalene would have lived her life in complete disorder and sinfulness without the direct and personal intervention of Jesus. Magdalene herself may have experienced her conversion as a miracle. Therese clearly knew she needed a miracle in her own life. She says explicitly, "God would have to work a miracle to make me grow up."

WILLFULNESS AND WILLINGNESS

Therese needed a miraculous event to change her because she experienced herself as powerless in the face of her feelings. Therese was indeed powerless because, in reality, she truly did not have these feelings; rather, the feelings had her. The feelings were overwhelming her sense of self. They were compromising her true desires, undermining her integrity,

contaminating her heart. Therese was experiencing the confusion of the compromise of codependency.

Therese had tried over the years to correct this “terrible fault” with determination and willfulness, but she had failed. She had come to know that she could not simply will to be different. And Therese knew what it was to be willful. As a child she was known in her family for her willfulness and stubbornness. Her mother wrote that the infant Therese “gets into frightful tantrums; when things don’t go just right and according to her way of thinking, she rolls on the floor in desperation like one without any hope. There are times when it gets too much for her and she literally chokes.” Therese’s willfulness had, no doubt, served her well as a child, enabling her to survive and to express her feelings of distress, but now she was coming to know that willfulness was not the way to address this “terrible fault.”

Of course, Therese at thirteen did not fully understand all that was happening to her, but she knew from the experience of her distress, with a remarkable precociousness, that she was caught in the clutches of a force more powerful than the power of her own willfulness—a force that was not conformable to the call of her deepest and truest self. She was certain that her “great desire . . . to practice virtue” and her “excessive touchiness” interacted to form a “strange way.”

“All arguments were useless,” she noted. She had reasoned with herself, made willful resolutions to be different, argued with herself, even scolded herself for being so touchy. She may even have had to listen to the scoldings of her older sisters. She certainly had heard the arguments and admonitions of her Uncle Isadore, who thought she was a “weakling.” Isadore, and perhaps Therese’s sisters, may have even explicitly told Therese that she was being immature or suggested that she was acting like a baby. That was how Therese referred to herself: “I was still in the swaddling clothes of a child,” with the “imperfections of childhood.” The management of her own feelings was, for Therese, “the work I had been unable to do in ten years”—the period between her mother’s death and her complete conversion.

She now turned more consciously from being willful in trying to correct herself to being *willing* to submit to God. She knew she needed to pray for a “miracle,” and she experienced her conversion as a miracle, not of her doing: “The work I had been unable to do in ten years was done by Jesus.” To this comment she adds, aware of surrendering her childish willfulness to a holy sense of willingness, “done by Jesus in one instant, contenting himself with my good will which was never lacking.” The “good will” that Jesus required of Therese was the “willingness”

that Therese did not refuse—the willingness “to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing” to herself in the embrace of Jesus.

IN NEED OF GOD’S POWER

In her description of the Christmas incident, Therese mentioned “that Celine wanted to continue treating me as a baby, since I was the youngest in the family.” Therese understood that part of her own pattern was to please Celine, to accommodate her sister’s desire. Therese would always be the youngest child of the family, but to remain in the role of a baby was beginning to undermine Therese’s call by God “to grow up” into personal integrity and responsibility. By going along with Celine’s desire and trying to please her, Therese was disregarding her own best interests, her personal call to inner maturity and authenticity.

Part of the Christmas arrangement was also to please her father: “Papa had always loved to see my happiness and listen to my cries of delight as I drew each surprise from the *magic shoes*.” Therese was aware that Celine and her father contributed partly to the “old custom” that fostered her own codependent pattern. But Therese did not blame them; rather, she added immediately, “and my dear King’s gaiety increased my own happiness very much.” She saw that she was reaping the harvest of these arrangements.

The “old custom” pleased everyone. The only problem, and Therese saw it, was that the pattern invited Therese to sell her soul to falseness. Therese understood that she shared in the responsibility, and that is why she saw it as a “terrible fault” and referred to “the defects of my childhood.” She was not practicing virtue for “God alone”; she was pleasing others for her own satisfaction. It was the falseness of Magdalene in miniature.

This pattern would not have been noticed by a casual outside observer; it was not even noticed by Therese’s father. But at some level Therese was aware that this pattern was undermining her true self. Therese knew that it must end: “Jesus desired to show me that I was to give up the defects of my childhood and so He withdrew its innocent pleasures.”

Writing this description of her conversion some ten years after the fact, Therese saw clearly how much the sequence of events that unfolded on that Christmas night were out of her control and, indeed, out of the control of her father and Celine. She attributed the good to Jesus’ power. She had received Communion at midnight mass, an experience she described as “receiving the *strong and powerful* God.” Therese knew that her conversion had something to do with her weakness and God’s strength. God alone could effect the change in Therese’s heart.

COMPLETE CONVERSION

She writes, "He [Jesus] permitted Papa, tired out after the Midnight Mass, to experience annoyance when seeing my shoes at the fireplace, and that he speak those words which pierced my heart: 'Well, fortunately this will be the last year!'" A tired, annoyed father made an understandable offhand comment, which he certainly did not intend for his daughter to hear. But this became the catalyst of Therese's conversion. "Well, fortunately this will be the last year," were the words that Therese heard, and she knew her father meant "the last year I will have to put up with this childishness from Therese."

The impatient words of her father "pierced" her heart. She felt hurt, offended by the most important person in her life; after all, this was Christmas, and she was trying her best to be a good girl, to please everyone. She may have felt a flash of annoyance and anger at her father, and if so, she would have been even more deeply troubled by these feelings. But, most deeply, she must have felt inadequate, a failure. She had not succeeded at her most important task: to please her father. He was annoyed and disturbed, and Therese was the cause.

Therese had failed. Her carefully crafted world collapsed. The feelings of inadequacy, her personal pain at not being a good girl, her upset at not being affirmed by her father, even perhaps the grievous feelings of annoyance and anger at her father, all converged and flooded her soul. She was helpless in their power. Tears filled her eyes.

Moreover, Therese must have experienced herself not only as a failure in this situation, in her efforts to please her father on this Christmas night, but also as a failure more generally, in her path of personal growth. Pleasing others was, after all, what Therese had taken to be an important, perhaps even the most important, element along her childish path of personal and spiritual development. Pleasing others had been a prized part of being "good" in the Martin household; it had been the way Therese herself had fit into the household; it had been the way she had managed to placate all her disturbing personal feelings; it had been the way she had believed she was doing God's will and pleasing God.

A sense of disillusionment must have come upon her. She had been allowing her need to please others to overcome her call to be her own person, and that excess had contaminated all her relationships. Her growth as a person was being limited by forces that victimized her and undermined her inner freedom. She had been content to allow this pattern to constitute her sense of her own goodness; it became an element in her self-image; it was her pattern of think-

ing about "charity" and her way of interacting with her family. Trapped in this dynamic, she had been reacting unfreely out of "excessive" feelings, out of compulsive habit. To leave this pattern was for Therese "a miracle," the great "grace of leaving my childhood," the "grace of my complete conversion."

As Therese walked up the stairs with her father's words piercing her heart, she bore "serenely the trial of being displeasing to herself." She was flooded with painful feelings. She had been on the wrong path; the grace she received at that moment was the grace of the awareness of that truth, as well as the grace to be able to bear the pain of that truth.

Then, suddenly, a deeper awareness and strength must have come to Therese, and it came not from her willful self-control but as a complete gift. In her failure, in her helplessness and distress, she did not die; she did not fall into nothingness. She continued to climb the stairs. A deep inner strength came to her. "I felt charity enter into my soul," she said later. Real charity, real love—not the counterfeit of codependency, but the energy of authentic charity—entered her heart. This was God's charity and power flooding her. She was not bad; she was loved and empowered, not by her willfulness and determination, but by God. She could bear the pain of being displeasing to herself. And she could now love her father with God's love, as he was in his weakness as well as in his strength. She did not have to see her father only as her King; she could see him and herself as human beings, "tired out after Midnight Mass"—imperfect human beings who could "experience annoyance."

Therese must have felt a great weight being lifted from her heart. She had seen a truth about herself and the way she was living her life; she had experienced the Spirit of Love and Truth and had been set free. Therese's walking up the steps in disillusionment and pain with "tears already glistening in [her] eyes," and then descending "the stairs rapidly" in awareness, relief, and inner freedom, gives us a picture of her conversion. Therese had been transformed from a person burdened with "excessive sensitivity" based on an excessive desire to please, to a maturing young woman who could bear serenely the truth of who she was and who she was called to be.

That truth was a painful trial because it shed light on a falseness in Therese's way. It was also a great relief because, while illuminating Therese's essential inability to willfully accomplish what she mistakenly thought was the way of goodness, it revealed the love and power of God's gift of mercy. It was a blinding light: Therese's inner world was completely transformed by a complete reordering of awareness. She spoke of "that luminous night," that "night of light,"

and Jesus' power, which "changed the night of my soul into rays of light."

On that Christmas night, as Therese came down the stairs and began delighting in the Christmas gifts, Celine noticed that for Therese, everything was the same and yet everything was different. Celine "believed it was all a dream." For Therese, however, "Fortunately it was a sweet reality," the "grace of my complete conversion." Therese would treasure this reality for the rest of her life as she experienced it more and more deeply: her capacity to remain true to herself in the face of feelings that tried to intimidate her. It was a grace because it had been beyond her own willfulness to achieve. It came to Therese on the occasion of the commemoration of God's great grace to the world, when "He made himself subject to weakness and suffering."

ACCOMMODATION WITHOUT COMPROMISE

In her inner world, Therese had now taken the first step on the path of inner freedom. Her outer world remained substantially the same. She could continue to use her great gift of sensitivity to respond to her father in joy, and with that joy be pleasing to her father. She descended the stairs a new person, and now, taking the "magic shoes," she "withdrew all the objects joyfully." She had "the happy appearance of a Queen" so that she could delight the "King." In the face of Therese's joy, her father was joyful. She had succeeded in delighting her father and in bringing cheer and lightness back into his heart.

But now everything was different because her inner world was different. She certainly was not being deceptive with her father. She was not pretending to be joyful; she was profoundly joyful. She had the joy of awareness, the release and relief, the inner freedom that emerged from her willingness to be in touch with the truth of herself. She knew herself in an essentially new and truth-filled way. This truth had set her free to be her deeply sensitive, loving, and joy-filled self.

She now pleased her father not because of her compulsion—not because she needed to feel that she was pleasing him, not to be affirmed by him as being good—but because she had the inner freedom and authenticity to deploy her gift of sensitivity in a compassionate and truly loving way. She acted not out of the tyranny of feelings but out of the creativity of her true self. She experienced a deep peace.

Therese writes that she "had discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half, and she was to preserve it forever!" At four and a half, Therese had lost her mother. It was a time of great grief and stress for Therese. Her

mother's death had stirred up deep feelings of abandonment—powerful feelings that would be calmed only by the soothing, bonding feelings associated with pleasing others. Therese experienced this Christmas gift, above all, as "strength of soul."

Therese's conversion changed her inner world, and what changed the most was her experience of her own inner strength. She moved from being a weak child to a strong young woman, willing to surrender to God. She came to know herself and love herself at a new level. God had empowered her to claim her soul, and she was never the same again. She "had the happiness of receiving the strong and powerful God."

She had previously been victimized by her feelings, but now she was "*strong and courageous*." She felt that Jesus was "*arming [her] with His weapons*." "Since that night," Therese writes, "I have never been defeated in any combat, but rather walked from victory to victory."

Even in the strength of this great gift of managing her feelings, however, Therese understood that she must always be vigilant. "The source of my tears was dried up," Therese writes, but then adds a telling qualification: "and has since reopened rarely and with great difficulty." Tears could flow when they were appropriate, but when they were "excessive" or when Therese would "begin to cry again for having cried," she knew they came from a weakness, not a "strength of soul." On several subsequent occasions, tears would be fitting. Her father's illness and institutionalization, for example, were to bring tears to Therese. But apparently, when Therese wrote of her conversion ten years later, she believed that she had never again fallen into the weakness of being completely overwhelmed by her feelings.

After she had entered Carmel, Therese learned more fully to use the energy of her sensitive feelings in a creative, compassionate way. She saw that if she did not sell her soul in pleasing others, she could please God while pleasing others. If her sensitive desire to please others were not a compulsion but a creative, compassionate expression flowing from her inner freedom, she could fulfill her desire to act for "God alone." That truth she had first understood when she returned downstairs to her father and began to open her Christmas gifts with joy. Later she became an expert at sensitively responding to the needs of her Carmelite sisters for God's sake.

In Carmel she became so skilled at pleasing others and accommodating situations that she never insisted on her own way. In fact, out of love and concern for her sisters, she became so adept at not even manifesting her preferences that the sisters she lived with for many years were never aware of them. Even in such basic areas as food or friendship, Therese

responded out of a creative sensitivity and compassion for others. Her sisters never became aware of Therese's suffering at not having her own preferences fulfilled. What the sisters were noticing was that she had given up her willfulness.

She appeared to have no will of her own. One sister wrote that for Therese, virtue must have been very easy, because she never complained. Other sisters were amazed when they read in Therese's writings that she had endured any suffering at all. Even her own blood sisters who lived with her in Carmel and who knew her intimately were astonished at how she accommodated others.

To the end of her life, Therese was, however, always aware of the power of the feelings that tried to manipulate her. As she lay on her deathbed, her feelings of needing to please others almost got the better of her. Mother Agnes recounts the story of Sister M. Philomena's nephew, who was to celebrate his first mass at Carmel and was to bring Therese communion. Therese was quite ill and was suffering enormous physical and emotional distress. For a while she had been regularly coughing blood, and she felt that she would not be able to receive the host. Nevertheless, Mother Agnes asked Therese to pray to be able to receive communion from the hand of Sister Philomena's nephew. Therese answered: "You know well that I can not ask this myself, but you ask it for me. . . . This evening, in spite of my feelings [preferences], I was asking God for this favor [to receive the host] in order to please my little sisters and so that the community might not be disappointed; but in my heart I told Him just the contrary; I told Him to do just what He wanted."

To her final days, Therese still had strong feelings to "please my little sisters and so that the community might not be disappointed," but in the end, "bearing serenely the trial of being displeasing" to herself, she turned to God and "told Him to do just what He wanted." Even on her deathbed, Therese was aware of her personal weakness and was willing to receive God's loving mercy. The reality of God's ongoing mercy in the face of personal weakness, and the willingness to receive that mercy, became dominant themes of Therese's "little way."

LIBERATION FROM BONDAGE

We can understand and appreciate Therese's complete conversion if we view it not as a moral or ethical change in Therese but as a life-changing experience coming from a complete shift in her self-awareness and self-understanding, which yielded an inner strength and freedom—a liberation from bondage. Until that time, Therese had been living in

a false pattern of being manipulated by her excessive feelings, intimidated by her excessive need to please and accommodate others, and not being true to herself. She had experienced herself as personally weak and helpless, in an inner prison.

She knew that her bondage could not be broken by simple willfulness. She also knew that she had some responsibility in her situation; what was going on reflected a "terrible fault." She needed to grow up; she needed a miracle; she was willing to receive a miracle.

God performed this miracle for Therese by allowing a remark of her tired and annoyed father to shock her into the awareness of a reality that was transforming. That reality was that Therese did not need to continue to be intimidated by her feelings, that she could "bear the pain" of being displeasing to herself and be true to her best self in the embrace of her powerful and merciful God.

This self-awareness opened Therese to a truth and an inner freedom that broke the bondage of her excessive feelings. It launched her on a new path of charity and courage. It gave her strength to use her gift of sensitivity creatively to accommodate others without ever again compromising her true self.

Therese's conversion was, no doubt, one of the experiences (possibly the main experience) of her own weakness and of God's power and mercy that became the basis for the "little way," which she was to fully comprehend and proclaim only many years later.

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Merging Congregations

Catherine M. Harmer, M.M.S., Ph.D.

For those who work as consultants or facilitators of religious congregations of women, a growing reality is the steady development of mergers or reconfigurations as a viable alternative for small groups with a long history of few or no vocations. The lack of vocations is a factor in many congregations, but for groups that have had no new members for many years, the future is growing shorter. For a number of groups, the choice is to look toward joining with a more viable congregation or to face a slow death by attrition.

It is hard to predict whether the slow but steady decline of congregations is a definite trend pointing to the death of religious life in North America or simply another stage in a long history. Although its death has been heralded a number of times, religious life goes on in ever different ways. For many older religious, the baseline was the unusually rapid growth of congregations from the 1930s to the 1960s. These were years of large entrance figures for many women's groups—a phenomenon that was unusual in the long history of religious life. The "boom" lasted more than a generation, long enough to create a false sense of what the future would be. Many reactions to the apparently sudden and large-scale decline in membership, starting in the late 1960s, linked the phenomenon to Vatican II; others saw it in terms of the

heightened recognition of the lay movement, as if that were an alternative to religious life.

Religious life, over its very long history, from the early days of Christianity, has actually been a very small reality within the church, with spurts of growth at times over the years. Current religious are among those who were part of the surge of the thirty-year period in the mid-twentieth century.

In the past twenty or thirty years, a number of congregations have looked at their declining numbers and considered possible solutions. In terms of their institutional ministries, one response was a consciously planned and developed empowerment of the laity. Thus, many Catholic schools and hospitals are now largely in the hands of the laity, who hold the leadership roles, even if the ownership is still with the religious congregation. In some cases, ownership has also been transferred. The works of the congregations continue, and the Catholic nature of the organizations is also continued. Often the presence of the sisters is very slight.

It is important to keep in mind that religious life is more than the works carried out by its members. Too often, women religious have been looked upon as the "free" labor for the works of the church, and the true reality of the life has been cloaked. I have even heard people suggest that perhaps the decline of the

The steps taken and decisions made during the merger process need to be ritualized in a way that reminds everyone that they are undertaking a sacred journey

"active" religious (i.e., those involved in the institutional ministries) is an act of God, a means of ensuring the empowerment of the laity. That could very well be, but on the whole, we do not really know the reasons behind much of what happens. Only time and history may be able to explain to a later generation the changes we have witnessed.

Over the past years, I, as well as other facilitators and consultants, have been called upon to help religious congregations as they considered an alternative to simply going "quietly into the night of death." The first time this happened to me, I found myself in a strange situation personally. I had the natural urge to "save" the group, to help them to continue as they were, with a hope that things could remain the same and that somehow new vocations would begin again. As I walked with the members in their inner work of studying together the possibilities, looking at death or at rebirth, and eventually entering into dialogue with several other groups, I found myself becoming more at peace with the idea of merger. In any merger, both groups end up gaining and losing. Neither group is untouched by the reality, even when a very small group becomes part of a very large one. In one group with which I worked, an older sister raised the fear that "we will disappear within the group." The pain of the insight was real, but my experience is that they do not "disappear."

The process of merger is a long and relatively complex one, encompassing several distinct stages. The first is the stage of recognizing that the group will continue to grow smaller because there have been no candidates for many years, and that at some time the group will no longer be viable. This most painful moment is one that needs to be experienced within the faith-filled life, which accepts that God may be working in ways we would rather not see. Often this stage is temporarily preempted by a frantic movement toward vocation promotion—a reaching out to find others who would like to join. The problem is not just that relatively few people are attracted to religious life but also that those few are unlikely to be willing to enter groups in which most of the members are thirty or forty years older than themselves.

The second stage is a painful one; the group confronts the choice between dying out or joining with another group, which in some ways is another form of dying. This phase may last for a long time, filled with denials and great hopes, until finally the group starts to move around the edges of a possible merger with another congregation.

Once the decision has been taken to consider merger seriously, the third stage is one of searching both inwardly and outwardly. For some congregations, this stage is helped by the fact that they belong to a "family" of religious (e.g., Franciscan, Dominican). During this third phase, it becomes essential for the group to consider several factors. One does not simply place an ad in a religious journal ("Small congregation seeking to merge with . . ."). During this third stage, the "active" group—that is, the one consciously considering merger—needs to focus on the essentials of their life that they wish to be able to continue after merger.

ELEMENTS IMPORTANT IN MERGER

In the first stage of this process, the group members need to focus clearly on what is of most importance to them, before they even consider potential partners. These important elements include internal aspects of the group as well as characteristics sought in potential partners.

Charism. Some congregations find it relatively easy to identify groups with similar charism. It is possible that they may have, at some time in their history, been part of the same congregation as another group. Depending on the nature of that past split, a merger may be more or less possible. Other groups may have a similarity of charism, based less on any historical connection than on a spirituality or commitment to a ministry that identifies them very clearly.

Mission and Ministry. These interlocked elements are basic to any possible merger. For some groups, the identification of similarity of mission is relatively simple; for example, a group that is totally involved in health care will be unlikely to be at home with one that is totally in education. As one thinks of merger, it is important to be clear about the mission of one's own group and how the ministries are connected to that mission.

Leadership. It is essential that the group seeking a merger and the groups approached have leadership teams that are able and willing to enter into what can be extended dialogues. It is also important that all leadership teams keep the members of their respective groups aware of and involved in the process, because an eventual merger will affect them all. What is perhaps most difficult to accept, from the very beginning, is that when a decision is made, some of the dialogue partners will not be part of the final merger. For example, one group with which I worked was in active dialogue with three other congregations. When that group came to the final decision point, some of the sisters suggested how wonderful it would be if all four groups could join together as one. Actually, among groups with very similar charism, that could eventually happen. It is important for leadership teams to understand and be ready to accept not only that one group may be chosen over others but also they must be prepared to help their own members understand that the choice is not a negation of them; a choice simply had to be made.

Property. While this may seem relatively simple, there are some very deep and important connections to property that go beyond acreage and buildings. Other aspects of property are deeply a part of the myth, history, and life of a congregation. Motherhouses have a very special place in the hearts and the heritage of a group. Some of these include the presence of a cemetery, even if not the only one held by the group.

One of the first things I read about mergers, many years ago, was about a decision that eliminated one of the two motherhouses involved. While this made good sense as a practical decision, it also meant moving a large number of elderly sisters from the motherhouse that was being closed. My heart was touched by what this may have meant to some of those women. One group with which I worked early in my merger experiences maintained both facilities, with the idea that anyone from either of the original groups could choose either house. That resulted in some logistical problems, but it was a very humane decision.

Process Facilitation. Over the years, my own experience and conversations with others have made it clear that definite processes must be involved in a merger and that good facilitation is necessary.

The first essential, in terms of process, is ensuring that all members who are capable will have the opportunity to be involved in all steps toward an eventual merger. An outside facilitator has the advantage of being viewed as impartial by the whole group. It is very important that the facilitator not become involved in the actual decision or indicate in any way what her own preference would be in terms of the eventual partner. The objectivity of the facilitator is key to the members' feeling safe from manipulation. Should the facilitator's own congregation become an eventual partner, it is important to find someone from an uninvolved community to take over the facilitation.

At times during the processes, group members become very emotionally affected. There can be a surfacing of fear, of anger about the potential merger, even of blaming present or past leaders for the situation. The leadership team must be willing to face the anger and fear that arise. An objective facilitator can provide a safe outlet for the anger and fear, and at the same time can protect the leaders, who need to stay focused.

Other Supportive Personnel. Counseling personnel can be valuable aids to the members as the group explores the concept of merger and enters into the actual work of merger. Counselors may work with individuals or facilitate group sharing, especially of fear and anger. Neither a leader of the congregation nor the process facilitator should function as a counselor, whose role is to help the individual sisters deal effectively and creatively with their fear, their anger, and eventually their need to be directly involved with the decision.

Supportive Bishop. Especially for diocesan congregations, it is essential to have the support of the bishop, who should be informed about the process early and kept apprised throughout. I have seen some wonderfully supportive gestures by bishops who were able to place the good of the community within the framework of what was good for the church as well.

Institutional Awareness. When a congregation owns institutions that will be affected by a potential merger, the leadership of those institutions must be made aware of the impending change and its possible effects. Special work may be needed with the institutions' administrative groups and boards if those bodies include people other than the congregational leadership. Schools and hospitals have a

Mergers are difficult realities filled with fear and hope, joy and sorrow, death and new life

value independent of their connection with the religious congregation, and the personnel need a sense of security that the work will go on. The types of ministries carried on by the merger partners need to be part of the conversation at some point, especially if the congregation has ownership. If the congregation does not own an institution but provides staff, it is important that the institutional leaders be made aware of any effect that the final decision might have on their work.

Value of Ritual. Throughout the stages of the merger process, it is important to make space and time for ritual. The steps taken and the decisions made need to be ritualized in a way that reminds everyone that they are undertaking a sacred journey. The journey has many stages, and the end is not known when the journey starts. For the most part, women religious have a good sense of ritual, especially in the liturgical sense. It is important that in addition to regular liturgy and prayers associated with meetings around the merger, there be a ritual recognition of each stage the group is experiencing, as well as a preparation for the next stage. I have, in my office, some precious mementos of the final stages of mergers experienced by groups with which I have journeyed. These symbols are even more important to the sisters themselves.

Decision Time. It is very important that all members are made aware of the point at which the decision is to be made. Also, during all stages of the process, various moments need to be noted as important steps in the journey.

When the time comes for decision, it is essential to ritualize this step in a very clear and sacred mode. Whether or not the group members do their final voting for merger together at the same place and time, there must be total clarity about being at the decision point and what it means to enter into the decision process. There is an element of seriousness, which does not need to be frightening but which does call for a plan and a ritual that indicate clearly that the group is now making the decision, the choice for merger, and the choice for the merger partner.

Celebration of Decision. When the decision is made, it is important to celebrate it immediately, even if a formal celebration will come later. It is ritually and psychologically important that there be a sense of completion, of having arrived at the moment of choice, and having made the decision. From this moment forward, a new process begins—a step toward a new reality, which may not be completed for months but which has moved the groups in the merger to a new stage. This stage will include many of the leadership-to-leadership processes of working out the details of the actual merger. However, the decision point is the moment when the group is most together in an act of great significance for the congregations and for the sisters themselves, and it needs to be recognized as a moment of importance.

POST-DECISION NEGOTIATION STAGE

Once the decision is made and is confirmed by the congregation of choice, there is a time of working through the details. This is basically a leadership-to-leadership phase, and it is important, but it generally concerns matters that may be of minor significance to the sisters themselves. The major step having been taken, minds and hearts begin to focus toward the future, and the details can be worked out. The progress of this phase is greatly aided by the presence of the facilitator(s) who worked with the merging congregations. The continued presence of who has walked with the members through the stages of decision imparts a sense of security that must not be underestimated. Not all the fear is limited to the stages preceding the decision; there will also be some fear during the post-decision stages.

CELEBRATION STAGE

Eventually, after all the agreements have been reached and all the detailed decisions have been made and communicated, two (or more) congregations formally merge to become one.

At this point, the celebration has to include the recognition of the merging of histories, charisms, organizations, and ministries. In some cases, all the members of the merging groups are able to be physically together; in others, geographical distance does not permit this. Even when the sisters are not together in one place, it is important to make clear, through ritual especially, that they are all together in heart and spirit.

POST-MERGER STAGE

After having gone through the painful, often difficult time of choice, decision, and new reality, it is possible to think that the work is now finished. However, it is not. There is the major work of helping all the sisters from both congregations to understand, accept, and eventually come to love the new reality they have created. Whether they stay in their original space or move somewhere else, engage in the same ministries or in new ones, there is the need for time to allow the new reality to come into birth. It is sometimes a long time after the merger before all realize that everyone has been changed. The expectation sometimes is that the members of the smaller group will simply become incorporated into, and the same as, the larger group. Each group brings into the reality its spirit, its history, its experience, its values—and out of that merger comes a new group, a new spirit, and a new congregation, regardless of names and spaces. It sometimes takes several years before this deeper merger takes place. Often the larger group is the most surprised by the impact of the merger.

In my work with merging groups, I generally suggest that after a period of time—perhaps a year or

more—I meet with the leadership, including those who were leaders of both groups at the time of merger and the current leaders of the new group. The purpose is to give them an opportunity and a process for sharing their experience of the “merger year.” Often those who were most actively involved and in favor of the merger are amazed at how difficult it has been for them personally. It is important to recognize that there has been a death and a resurrection. Too often, in the joy of the new life, the necessary grieving has been skipped. Out of these meetings comes an understanding that it is appropriate to grieve what has been lost while glorying in what has been created.

Mergers are difficult realities filled with fear and hope, joy and sorrow, death and new life. It is important for all of us who walk with these groups to recognize the many aspects that are part of the journey, to be supportive of those who are living through them, and to help whenever possible to keep the focus on what is essential: the possibility of new life. We who facilitate are given a wonderful opportunity to walk with courageous people who are moving toward new life with both their hope and their fears. We need to walk very gently and lovingly.



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Losing One's Life for the Lord

*Cheryl France, S.C., M.D., and
Tony DeProspero, Ph.D.*

He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Mark 8:34–36)

The mandate to take up the cross and lose one's life for the sake of the gospel is a powerful motivator for those engaged in ministry. Religious persons (members of religious congregations, committed Christians) seem readily to identify with picking up and carrying the cross. Yet the distinction between what is losing self for God's sake and what is self-destruction may not be clear.

Diverse personality styles contribute to the rich diversity of humankind and even to complementarity in community life. Nuanced interpretations of a following of Jesus, in theory and in practice, add color and vibrancy to the church. Yet unexamined styles, traits, and particularly disorders can skew an individual's approach to any passage of scripture.

BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

Let us begin by considering the ancient literature texts from which this scripture is translated. First, the word *lose* comes from the Greek word *apollumi*,

which also means to destroy or to render useless. This losing implies not an exchange but a handing over—hence, a gift of myself. To hand my life over as gift, it must be a free choice; I cannot be coerced internally or externally. Internal coercion might consist of fear, guilt, or being bound by a sense of duty or enslavement. External coercion to loss of life might be due to poverty, abuse or violence, family or religious community expectations, or peer pressure. The best gifts—or at least those given and received under the best circumstances, between persons who know and love each other—are gifts of value, not just junk being thrown away. Such gifts are chosen and given with what the other would desire and enjoy in mind. This loss of life as self-gift is not self-hate nor even a pious asceticism opposing self-fulfillment. Rather, it is an orientation of my life not focused on myself at all, neither as self-esteem nor as self-abasement, not self-centered or self-emptying. But it is a reorientation of life toward the good news that God has acted decisively and ultimately in Jesus. Such a reorientation implies that I am no longer at the center; the One to whom I gift my life is.

The scriptures contrast loss (*apollumi*) of self for the sake of the gospel with the Greek *zemioo*, or losing as “forfeiting” of life to gain the whole world. Loss of myself as a free gift implies that there are no strings attached; it is not merely a loan or an object of barter, given in exchange for something in return

(good health, rewards, respect of others). Conversely, when we forfeit ourselves, we're trading in our very selves for the world. The irony here is that giving only to get (we expect "the world" in exchange) leads ultimately to loss. This loss occurs not only in an eternal sense but in the here and now: we have assigned a value to our very self, our irreplaceable unique person, and sold it off.

The Greek word used for "life" in this passage is *psuche*, not an immortal part of a human being but the true self, the living self, the seat of feelings, desires, affections, and aversions. This is the same word used by Jesus to describe his gift of his life (John 10:11, 15, 17, 15:13). To save one's life is the opposite of Jesus' action, places one outside of the community shaped by Jesus' gift of his life, and leads to loss of true life. And the loss is not just in eternity (as ultimately important as this is) but also in the present. What is clung to in this act of "saving life" is a false self—an un-integrated, defensive personality structure.

The Greek *sozo* ("save") refers to rescuing from danger or destruction. Originally, the injunction that those who try to save their lives will lose them was provided to soldiers in battle; the first to die will be those who turn and run. Obviously, the contexts for "saving" differ here. Saving that is clinging to life, hoarding and protecting, leads to death, at least of my person as a free human being, unencumbered by maladaptive defenses. Saving that is an act of God, made possible by my self-gift, is a return of my life—rich, real, and alive. As the advertisement for a popular antidepressant medication claims, the healed patient can rejoice, "I got my life back."

This is "good news," which is the meaning of *euaggeliou*, translated as "gospel" in this passage. Losing life in union with and for the sake of Jesus literally is good news and has the power to restore, to liberate, and to lead to the relinquishment of defenses that rob one of real life.

We are not Greek scholars and do not claim to provide an exhaustive analysis of the scripture. We simply suggest that this passage, rather than being oxymoronic, might mean something to this effect: Whoever freely hands over his or her true self to the purposes of the gospel, as Jesus did, will rescue it from danger.

PERSONALITY INFLUENCE

Now we turn to a consideration of personality traits and their effects on a reading and following of this scripture. Certain characteristics may lead to an outright rejection of it as unlivable—or, contrarily, to a passionate embrace of it as highly desirable. But

such decisions may be based on fallacious reasoning due to personality traits that match the diagnostic characteristics for certain Axis II Personality Disorders found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition (DSM-IV).

In this regard it is important to provide some brief background on the current conceptualization of personality disorders. First, they are not considered major mental illnesses. According to the DSM-IV, only when personality traits are "inflexible, maladaptive, and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress" do they constitute personality disorders. In general, they are thought to be shaped by experience, often in early life, rather than considered byproducts of chemical imbalance in the brain. These traits or disorders are defined according to functional behavior groups, which are sometimes descriptive (paranoid, narcissistic) and sometimes not (borderline). Their experiential origins are as individualized as the persons who have them. For present purposes we shall consider a number of them according to two thematic clusters: traits of persons who feel excessively bad about themselves, and traits of those who feel "too good" about themselves.

Traits reflecting a poor opinion of oneself may be expressed as "unstable self-image" (borderline) or "fear of being unable to care for oneself" (dependent). These may lead to "frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment" or "going to excessive lengths to obtain nurturance and support from others" (borderline and dependent, respectively). These types of traits are potential motivators for a skewed interpretation of the scripture, as a person may try to prove or "buy" a better self-opinion.

One does well, of course, to have a healthy dose of self-esteem. However, it is also possible to demonstrate behaviors or attitudes suggesting that one feels "too good" about oneself—that is, superior to others. This may be reflected in a "lack of remorse" when one has hurt another, "disregard for the safety of others" (antisocial), or a "sense of entitlement" and being "interpersonally exploitive" (narcissistic).

We do not mean to suggest that people who reject or accept this scripture or any other are doing so because of a personality disorder. Nor do we mean to be "sanists" (to borrow a term from Michael Perlin, author of *The Hidden Prejudice: Mental Disability on Trial*) and claim that anyone with a personality disorder is incapable of making a rational decision. The point is simply that pathological behaviors and attitudes, as reflected in personality disorder characteristics, may unconsciously influence personal choice. An individual with a given personality disorder may choose to accept or reject the gospel but may do so out of a defended, unfree, "wrongful" stance.

Persons with personality disorders may generally be differentiated from neurotic individuals on the basis of amenability to change. The defenses used in personality disorders are often ego-syntonic. The person considers these traits desirable and hence is reluctant to submit them for correction or sometimes even for examination. Neurotic defenses, on the other hand, are generally ego-dystonic; the individual recognizes them as a source of pain, interpersonal conflict, and interference in personal growth. Such persons will more readily seek to alter maladaptive behaviors or attitudes. Personality-disordered persons may view their problems as arising from outside of themselves and resist the notion that their own attitudes or behaviors must change if they are to grow. The first step, therefore, may need to be work at transforming ego-syntonic defenses into ego-dystonic ones. This may be aided by tapping into the underlying pain, fear, or sadness that has fueled the defense. Such work may be long and arduous. But especially for the person who reads the scriptures and has a desire to follow Jesus, a true grasp of the liberating gospel message may facilitate such transformation and bring about healing.

WRONGFUL ACCEPTANCE

Some persons may respond to this biblical passage with delight and fervor, not seeming to count the cost at all. An example would be a person with traits of a borderline personality disorder. Characteristics include "frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment" and "identity disturbance: markedly and persistently unstable self-image or sense of self," as well as repeated suicidal threats or gestures. Such persons may "give themselves away" or even threaten or attempt to kill themselves "as an act of love," but they are not doing it primarily because of a guiding religious principle. To some extent it is self-suggestive that such giving to others is an attempt to buy friendship or approval and avoid abandonment. Such persons have fundamental and disturbing questions about their own identity and worth. Of course, giving, even of oneself, is no guarantee of the friendship of others and cannot buy the blessing of God. In contrast, freely losing oneself in response to Jesus' invitation brings wholeness to life, both for the individual and for others.

Another characteristic that may lead to a pathological adherence to this scripture comes from the narcissistic personality disorder. A characteristic of this disorder is "a grandiose sense of self-importance" (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior) in a person who "requires excessive admiration." In ministry, such indi-

viduals draw much attention to the sacrifice of self they make in the service of God and church. They may be able to accomplish much good but clamor for strokes and praise, especially from superiors. However, their demand for acclaim is really an attempt to compensate for self-loathing, the result of seeing themselves as deficient and lacking. Hence, when the recognition is not forthcoming, it may precipitate rage, profound discouragement, or abandonment of these efforts altogether. Identification and healing of the pain, which underlies this defensive putting forward of the self, may free one from the need for such attention and admiration.

Certain characteristics of the avoidant personality disorder may also attract one in an unfree manner to this scripture. Specifically, we refer to the person who is "preoccupied with being criticized or rejected in social situations" or "views self as socially inept, personally unappealing, inferior to others." In contrast to narcissists, people with avoidant personality disorder are keenly and consciously aware of their shortcomings and may feel that their lives aren't really worth saving. For these individuals, losing one's life seems akin to throwing out trash. Such a gift is hardly valuable and may be easily dispensed with, without much forethought. Healing can take place for these individuals through recognition of their own value and worth and "how precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones."

A person with dependent personality disorder "needs others to assume responsibility for major areas of [his or her] life" or "goes to excessive lengths to obtain nurturance and support from others, to the point of volunteering to do things that are unpleasant." Such motivation is similar to that demonstrated in borderline personality individuals, who feel that they must "earn" the approval of other persons. Here, self-gift is actually *zemioo*, or "forfeiture"—bartering for what is lacking in the personality structure. But that which is traded for is never enough, does not fill up what is lacking. Such individuals must eventually find that they do indeed possess inner resources that cannot be bought from another. Only then, when the treasure is found, can it be freely given away.

Obsessive-compulsive personality disorder characterizes a person who is "excessively devoted to work and productivity to the exclusion of friendships and leisure activities" or who is "over-conscientious, scrupulous, and inflexible in matters about morality, ethics, or values." Such individuals may set about the task of losing their life to gain it, always measuring what has been accomplished and what is yet to be done, never letting down their guard. Their giving is calculated and controlled, never indulgent or extravagant. Yet true self-gift requires letting go and relin-

quishing ownership to the One to whom it is gifted (God). Such letting go and closure is very difficult for this personality structure. An encounter with the utter magnanimity of God can be curative.

Finally, one must consider those who accept this scripture for reasons characteristic of the antisocial personality disorder. At first this may seem contradictory; one would not expect antisocial individuals to be giving. However, the character of the antisocial personality disorder is sometimes misunderstood and does not refer exclusively to criminal-type motivation. Some persons with antisocial traits evidence a "reckless disregard for safety of self." Often impulsively, they give away things necessary for their own health, welfare, or happiness out of a self-destructive motivation and may even hope that if they give all of themselves away, they will be dead and done with it. Such motivation hardly inspires self-gift as honoring God with something of value and does not indicate much reflection on it. Persons with antisocial traits may benefit from learning to pause before acting on impulse and making a realistic account of who they are and what they have to give as gift.

WRONGFUL REJECTION

Individuals may reject Jesus' words because of other types of personality characteristics. First, let us consider the paranoid personality, who is "preoccupied with unjustified doubts about the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends or associates," and the schizoid personality, who almost always chooses "solitary activities." These persons may be motivated to reject the idea of giving their life solely because of their rejection of relationship in general. The gift of self called for by Jesus presupposes a degree of intimacy with him that may be antithetical to these personality structures. Such a refusal of intimate relationship often stems from a sense of having been rejected in the past and a wariness regarding others. Empathic acceptance by another, if allowed for by a crack in the defensive structure, may heal the scars of rejection and open the person to the vulnerability required of relationship.

An outright rejection of Jesus' challenging words is perhaps most clearly exemplified, as alluded to earlier, by other characteristics of the antisocial and narcissistic personality disorders. Individuals with those characteristics may feel the need to focus entirely on their own well-being to the exclusion of others and cannot "afford" to give away themselves or their own resources. In reality, the inflated sense of self characterizing these personalities is a defense against a truly poor self-opinion, and the fragile, highly defended self is too threatened by even the suggestion

that losing one's life might be a good. Also, because of their high degree of self-centeredness, both personality types may have great difficulty empathizing with the human experience of Jesus (or anyone else).

Similarly, a person with dependent personality disorder is "unrealistically preoccupied with fears of being left to take care of himself or herself." This person may feel it is necessary to hold on to whatever he or she has in order to ensure a secure future. This is also reflected in the obsessive-compulsive personality, who "adopts a miserly spending style toward both self and others; money is viewed as something to be hoarded for future catastrophes." Such miserliness is undoubtedly a guarantee of miserableness. It is in giving that we receive, and true fulfillment comes not from having a pile of wealth but from finding one's wealth in the love of God.

TOWARD A FREE GIFT OF SELF

When Jesus says that whoever loses their life for his sake and for that of the gospel will find it, his words may be seized upon as a means of earning goodness or admiration or as a fulfillment of self-destructive fantasies. His words may be rejected by those who feel that they cannot afford to give, or that they are so much better than others that they do not need to give, or that they do not mind giving but prefer to avoid interaction with people. Recognition of underlying personality structures and the defenses that support them may aid in moving toward a free gift of self and a closer following of Jesus.



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REGRET

James Torrens, S.J.

On the board, students, I've just scribbled, look,
ten moments of my life that make me squirm.
They're incidents it scalds me to affirm
but memory keeps tending in its book—
the deviation that my choices took
from knuckleheadedness (what a bull's-eye term)
or fear, in its mutations, airborne germ
that in my lungs finds a receptive nook.
I would so love to have the moments back,
erasing, but the script's indelible.
Besides, the itch of self-correction's wrong,
presuming a perspective that I lack.
Better to leave the faults here, legible,
looking to mercy's acids to stay strong.

I write this—the prose, not the poetry—on August 5, the fortieth anniversary of my ordination. Earlier today, offering mass twice at the state penitentiary of Baja California, in Tijuana, I told the inmates and their families that I could think of no more appropriate way of honoring my ordination than by passing it with them. My homily was a bit disconnected, as usual, but they surprised me at the end by clapping. Later I got a lot of handshakes and hugs when they came up after the last blessing for the sprinkling of holy water, one person at a time.

The one thing I made sure to tell them all was the overriding importance of trust—trust in the Lord's invitation and guidance, in the means being available to carry out one's task in life, and in the fruitfulness of apparently wasted endeavors. Concerning this last, I gave them an example from our difficulties in communication among the pastoral team. I had shown up on a Friday evening the week before, after a 45-minute drive, to find that I was not really needed for mass. Pretty irritating. However, the prisoners started coming for Confession—for some of them, their first in years, or even their first ever. A plan other than my own was obviously at work. In other words, however

awkward our own arrangements, divine providence is unsleeping, still full of surprises. We ourselves can do nothing better than be instruments in those hands.

The notion of a larger plan—a plotting of events, incredibly flexible and nonetheless sure, that exceeds whatever we can make sense of—is pretty crucial and very helpful. In recent months, at an age much given to retrospection, I have been painfully reminded of pastoral situations in which I failed to take the initiative or to show real courage. A handful of these moments stand out sharply, as if they happened yesterday. Others too occur, of the mighty embarrassing kind—the kind you wince to remember. My poem recreates this phenomenon. This experience, however, was put much better in the seventeenth century by George Herbert in his unrivaled poem “Love.” Herbert begins, “Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, / Guiltie of dust and sin.”

Love doesn’t want us to draw back. That was Herbert’s message, and one I try to pass on to the inmates. Most of them have a ton of regrets. They have much reconciling to do with their spouses or families. Their past behavior weighs on them. I question whether Alice Munro, with her novelist’s keen eye, got it right in having a character say (in “Family Furnishings,” *New Yorker*, July 23, 2001) that whereas women are prone to “a fond fingering of whatever was grisly or disastrous, men were not like this.” The narrator explains: “Men looked away from frightful happenings as soon as they could and behaved as if there were no use, once things were over with, in mentioning them or thinking about them ever again.” Really? There are plenty of exceptions to this rule. It may be, of course, that events we ourselves have triggered stay with us in a way that others don’t.

Regrets are natural, just as guilt for misdeeds—in other words, for sins—is quite appropriate. Regrets can be beneficial, reminding us of our smallness and of the smudge of imperfection that we inevitably leave, and highlighting divine goodness. But just as guilt

feelings for sins absolved can be a plague and a canker, so can regrets. They are like driving with the brake on. “I have always regretted that I didn’t do such and such,” one can be caught saying—take up a chance for extra studies, take a certain assignment, take what T. S. Eliot called “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender.” This is to look at things with other eyes than those of the Mysterious One of so much greater scope. The “moment’s surrender” proved disastrous for Eliot, after all. Of course, the list of possible regrets is endless: others supposedly have passed us over, failed to appreciate us, maybe failed to love us. Often, there is no way of judging how true the nagging message is, and nothing you can do about it anyway. It’s all spilt milk.

Regrets are that little cloud dogging us. They are the Lot’s wife that can’t resist the backward look (here again, the book of *Genesis* plumbs human conduct brilliantly). They keep us from saying with the psalmist, in that wonderful Psalm 84, about the lovely dwelling place, “Lord God of hosts, happy the one who trusts in you.” Here we are stuck on repeating “If only, if only.” Each day, meanwhile, is a start-up, a fresh opportunity. That is what I told my friends in the penitentiary, and what I had to tell myself at the same instant (for as Augustine insisted in his treatise on pastors, the pastor is always also the sheep). Saint Paul, as usual, put it best: “Now is the acceptable time” (2 Corinthians 6, 2)—not yesterday.



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Challenges to Communities

Robert Murray, O.S.A., Ph.D.

To state that the face, character, and composition of religious communities in America are changing would be neither insightful nor profound. In an article titled "Where Is Religious Life Going?" (*Review for Religious*, May-June 1990), M. Basil Pennington writes that in the years since the close of the Second Vatican Council, the average age of members of many religious congregations and monastic communities has increased significantly, while the number of members has decreased just as dramatically. These changes in the membership of America's religious congregations have been met by calls for communities to revisit their original mission, reconsider their traditional work, and even consider the redefinition of community in response to these evolving demographics. While many have called for refounding and strategic planning as a means of ensuring long-term survival, the time may have come when the issue is not just survival but also ensuring the ethical treatment of those currently living within community.

This author collected data from 484 members of seven different religious communities and congregations—data that, while supporting the notion of the changing face of religious communities, also raised a number of questions that each community must now address, not only as a matter of strategic planning but also as a responsibility to its members and

to those contemplating joining. Such questions warrant sufficient reflection and dialogue to develop a basis for a call to action.

GRAYING OR GREENING OF COMMUNITIES

As noted by David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis in *The Future of Religious Orders in the United States*, religious communities in America are aging. This was confirmed by the respondents to this survey. Among the 484 respondents, the median age across groups was 59 years. A number of authors have highlighted the significance of this trend in aging in terms of its implications for a community's ability to continue to staff its apostolates, to generate income, to expand financial resources from work and salaried assignments, and to address the financial impact of reallocating resources to meet the special needs of an aging community. However, while these and other practical organizational issues are essential to the well-being of a community, the aging of our communities' membership raises issues of equal importance and may in fact threaten our very *raison d'être*. Questions for reflection:

- Has our community planned for the changing psycho-social and spiritual needs of our aging members?

- How does the systematic and developmental movement toward a life-stage consolidation of our aging members affect the enactment of our mission and the vitality of the younger members of our community?
- Have we identified the critical number required not simply to meet our institutional commitments and financial obligations but also to maintain a climate in which our charism is embodied, our mission enacted, and our members supported and formed?
- Finally, have we discussed the ethical implications of bringing new, younger men and women, hoping to experience community life, into our aging congregation/community?

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE?

In an article titled “Deciding Community Life’s Future” (HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, Fall 1993), Eileen McNerney, C.S.J., shared a letter from a young woman who was discerning a religious vocation. The woman, after living and sharing ministry with a religious congregation, noted her concern over the interpersonal relationships exhibited. She had observed a sense of “detachment” and noted that she was not the “type of person who can live with other people and just scratch the surface of life on a daily basis.” McNerney posited that one of the reasons for the detachment or loneliness often experienced in community life is that working through difficult feelings takes time and commitment. The transient nature of community life makes such exercises a luxury. While this is certainly a possible explanation, another one that is somewhat more difficult to remedy is suggested by Pennington and supported by the data of this study.

Pennington identifies “interpretive schemes” as the understandings that the members of the community “share with regard to the world and their place in it.” Interpretive schemes provide members with a basis for developing a sense of shared belongingness. The question could be asked, What happens to this sense of belongingness when community members have diverse interpretive schemes?

The data not only suggest that the communities assessed are getting older; they also indicate that a preponderance of the members experienced a formational process reflective of the pre-Vatican II church. In my survey of 484 respondents, 303 (63.7 percent) reported making first profession before 1965. If Pennington is correct in noting that interpretive schemes are often articulated (and thus promulgated implicitly) by way of the stories told, the metaphors used to describe a community, and the rites employed, then

Old interpretive schemes need to be challenged, reinterpreted, and explicitly conveyed so that ethical planning can occur

most certainly those formed in a pre-Vatican II church and community have a different set of interpretive schemes than those who entered community in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Questions for reflection:

- How has our community identified, supported, and attempted to move to a new set of interpretive schemes that are commonly shared?
- If the interpretive scheme provides a base of belongingness and if our community has a split similar to that reported in this current survey, to what degree do we experience a single community? How hospitable are we to those with the minority view? Or have we moved to accept a multiplicity of groups, with multiple and varied interpretive schemes, within our community?
- To what degree do differing interpretive schemes stimulate conflict, both intrapersonally and interpersonally? How has our community responded to this conflict?

It is not good enough to simply discount one group as “too old” or “too young.” The varied interpretive schemes need to be adjusted to allow for a common perspective from which to view the individual member’s place within the community and the community’s place within the church. As Pennington explains, embracing new interpretive schemes, which in turn leads to new decision making and action, produces considerable conflict among those espousing the original (or at least the most recent) interpretive schemes. Communities must, in justice, respect this tension and difficulty in letting go and letting grow. But even

with that in mind, the realities facing community life demand that old interpretive schemes need to be challenged, reinterpreted, and explicitly conveyed so that ethical planning can occur. The implications for continuing education within and among religious communities cannot be overemphasized.

FINDING IDENTITY IN WHAT WE DO

The success of many religious communities in meeting the material and spiritual needs of those to whom they minister fosters confidence in the purposefulness and meaningfulness of their work and in how the ministries are developed and administered. However, in any system or organization, whether secular or religious, the “what” we do (our ministry) becomes blurred with why we do it (our mission). What we do—for example, staff a particular school or parish—may no longer be seen as a tool to living out our purpose or mission; rather, it becomes our mission and purpose! It is not uncommon to see Sister, Father, and Brother finding that they cannot attend house meetings or faith sharing because of the demands of their ministry. “I am sorry, but I have a meeting tonight” is often employed as the explanation for absence—not from the demands of the apostolate but from the opportunity for community.

In the current survey, the respondents identified over 53 percent of their daily activities as devoted to ministerial duties. Contrast this to 16 percent devoted to local community activity and 11 percent to private prayer; and one might question whether ministry is mission or simply one vehicle for its delivery. Furthermore, the respondents, while predominantly engaged in educational ministry (44.5 percent), reflected a wide range of ecclesial ministry, including parochial ministry, social work, health care, and pastoral counseling and care. Such ministerial diversity precipitates a challenge to a sense of cohesiveness and oneness, with each ministry posing varied calendars and demands to be juggled as members attempt to share life and time with each other. For example, over half of our respondents reported attending fewer than nine structured prayer experiences per week and fewer than 5.11 meals per week. Enhancing cohesiveness within community life becomes difficult when structured moments of gathering, such as prayer and meals, become harder to schedule. Questions for reflection:

- Is the ministry in which we are engaged viewed as an avenue for sharing our community’s mission? Do we experience entrenchment and personal ownership around ministries rather than around community mission?

- How have we addressed the new challenges to developing community life? What processes have we established to help members balance the varied demands that pull at their own limited resources of time and energy as a reflection of our community and concern? How do we confront ourselves and our brothers or sisters who continue to prioritize noncommunity life experiences at the expense of our community identity and well-being?

SMALL LOCAL COMMUNITIES

When asked to identify the size of the community in which they lived, 149 respondents (31 percent) reported living in a community of fewer than 5 members, and an additional 160 (33.4 percent) said that their communities had 5 to 10 members. Such a small group-living arrangement can provide for increased intimacy, a sense of belonging, and communal sharing. However, such a dynamic can also result in increased interpersonal conflict if the members are not helped to learn the principles and skills required for small-group formation and development. Beyond the interpersonal challenges confronting the members of a small group, there is a challenge to community identity. With the expansion of independent “houses,” it is all too easy to begin to conceptualize community with a small *c*. Questions for reflection:

- Do members of our community identify themselves as members of, say, the Tau House, or of 5 Bradford Square, rather than as members of our community?
- Have we found that the activities of our local house or its members often take precedence over larger community gatherings? Or have we noticed that assignments in and/or out of the house at the request of the superior and for the good of the larger community are resisted and even resented? Do we sometimes feel that we will do whatever it takes to keep the house “as is”?

NEED FOR LEADERSHIP

In their article “Religious-Life Issues in a Time of Transition” (*Review for Religious*, March-April 1992), John A. Grindel and Sean Peters contend that “most people agree that religious life will continue as a driving force in the future life of the church.” While this position is hopeful, there is a danger in blindly embracing it without challenging the significant impact of the changing nature of community membership on those currently living in community as well as on those who may seek entrance.

Effective leaders are needed who can meet the demands of this time of transition by inviting community members into a process that facilitates that change and keeps it healthy, true to mission, and supportive of all members. Leaders are called to be faithful to the unique charism and mission of their community by supporting those interpretive schemes which have defined, and will continue to define, the community's view of the world and its place in it.

Communities must confront the impact of aging on their membership. It is essential to move beyond questions of resources and their allocation to address the impact of aging on the vitality of the community and to determine ways of maintaining the critical mass necessary to perpetuate community life. As communities prepare for the social, psychological, and spiritual impact of aging, they must be sensitive not just to the unique needs of the older members but also to the impact of the aging process on younger members and the related question of whether new members can be brought into this context with a real hope of experiencing community.

While the current climate of religious life could be interpreted as frightening, we need only be sensitive to the history of religious life within the church and within our religious communities to more accurately view this climate as invitational. The facts and statistics surrounding religious life are calling consecrated men and women to gather in prayerful dialogue on the meaning of their being together in light of their ecclesial mission. Such meaning-making necessitates taking seriously the unique charism of religious communities as they give flesh to their mission in service to the church. The greatest challenge may be not in the questions we ask of our brothers, our sisters, or our community administrators, but in the very act of gathering in mutual dialogue from different religious perspectives or schemes. The process of celebrating such privileged moments is perhaps the ultimate challenge that we are called to value and embrace.

It is essential to move beyond questions of resources and their allocation to address the impact of aging on the vitality of community

RECOMMENDED READING

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The Danger in Visions

Allan Schnarr, Ph.D.

The divinity in our humanity is held in the words "I Am Who I Say I Am." To be a person in the image of God is to create the meaning of one's own experiences. This grounds experience in a coherent self that has continuity over time, allowing for faithfulness in relationship to others. It means accepting responsibility for the meaning one creates and for the choices and consequences that flow from this meaning. At all times I am defining myself, saying who I am in relationship to all that is other. The liberating challenge in all this is the implication that God is not only other but also in myself. I participate in the Creator's power. I am a cocreator.

The danger in receiving visions from God is in the possibility of polarizing myself and God. If I see my visions as supernatural events, then they are something that happens to me. I am not a cocreator. I bear no responsibility for actions that flow from my visions. Saying God made me do it may be no better than blaming the devil. If I do not create the meaning of my experience and of my own actions as well, the divinity in my humanity is a sham.

Surrender to God does not mean loss of self in the other. God is not a manipulator, not an abuser, not a codependent. God does not offer freedom with one hand and take it away with the other. Surrender to God does mean complete openness to

the full truth of one's experience. It means joining in the essence of divinity: full awareness informing creative choice. When I allow myself to be open to whatever I am experiencing, I am ready to incarnate my choices. I embody the truth. My word is made flesh.

The crux of being a cocreator in the image of God is in the process of revelation: the truth will out. I join God in what God is doing by actively bringing the truth to light. This means cultivating discipline in my awareness, becoming attentive to my habitual ways of consigning truth to the darkness. In whatever ways I avoid knowing what I am experiencing, I am cloaking the truth. My call is to catch myself saying, "I'd rather not know," turn myself around, and open myself to what is happening.

I need to discipline my attention to noticing the full range of my experiences. I can learn to be more tuned in to my sensory experience, to become sufficiently present to see, hear, smell, touch, and taste the moment. With practice I can learn to listen to my imagination, to the rich storehouse of symbols and possibilities flowing therein. With dedication I can improve my ability to think critically about the beliefs that focus the meaning of my experiences. With dependable care I can allow myself increasing clarity in feeling the emotions that move me to action. I need

to cherish sensation, imagination, reasoning, and feeling if I am to support the emergence of the truth. Becoming fully conscious is the way of divinity.

The danger in visions is in escaping responsibility for the incarnation of truth. In what ways does my imagination feed the vision? What place do the images in the vision have in the themes that flow through the story of my life? In what way might the images be a projection of something within me that I've avoided facing or accepting? How are these images limited or orchestrated by the beliefs that guide my thoughts? How critically am I willing to think about these beliefs? From what immediate sensory or emotional experience might a vision be distracting me? What am I not noticing in my relationship to others at the moment of the vision? What do I get from the vision? What behaviors might I be using the vision to justify? How does the vision give me a way to meet unmet needs? These are only some of the questions that the responsible visionary wants to address.

All in all, it seems to me that the safe course is to doubt visions, especially in terms of their supernatural otherness. The possibility of naively arrogating God's revelation is all too grave. Surely it's much more magnificent to let the vision find its place in the ongoing revelation that is the story of my life. When I experience visions, I'm careful to process them thoroughly, sifting the meaning into the flow of who I say I am. Then when I tell of the experience, it's simply another moment of revelation. It's a part of the greater whole, just like me.



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Prophets in Religious Life

Janet Malone, C.N.D., Ed.D.

As children, many of us were read “The Ugly Duckling” by Hans Christian Andersen. Listening to that story, we suffered with the ugly duckling through its growth struggles and rejoiced at its metamorphosis into a beautiful swan. Perhaps, as adults, we have not thought about that tale recently, yet the metaphor of the ugly duckling remains very powerful.

In this article the metaphor of the ugly duckling is used to explore the prophet in religious life. Like becoming a graceful swan, becoming a prophet is a long, arduous growth process. Initially, the potential prophet doesn’t understand what is happening and resists the loneliness and marginalization. Concomitant with the prophet’s struggle is the congregation’s struggle with this “troublemaker.” The congregation doesn’t understand this dreamer, who often seems out of sync with the group. Pain, anger, frustration, and sadness are experienced by both parties during the conversion process—yet both must go through it in order for the ugly duckling to be able to live the gift of prophethood within religious life.

CONVERSION IS BILATERAL

Nobody sets out to be a prophet. The process is a gift, a dynamic call-response from God that encompasses the individual’s personality, intelligence, heart,

and spirit. From a faith perspective, this gift also involves mystery, the ineffable: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go out and bear fruit” (John 15:16). At the same time, it only becomes a call when there is a response. Such a response requires a significant conversion on the part of both the individual and the congregation. This response is a long growth journey. In this exploration, the role of prophet is not seen as a “better than” in a congregation. Rather, it is a call like other calls and specific to the totality of the person, called with his or her gifts, talents, and growth areas. It is the call-response of the potential prophet in a congregation.

A prophetic call never occurs in isolation; it happens within the context of a particular religious community, a particular congregational culture, a church culture, and a societal culture. Coming home to the honing and conversion in this process must be contextualized within all these cultures.

In the conversion process experienced by both the prophet and the congregation, it is paramount for each congregation member to ask certain questions: Who is/are the prophet(s) in this group? Am I a prophet, a dreamer? Has anyone ever told me I am a prophet, a dreamer? Have I ever told another person he or she is a prophet, a dreamer in the congregation?

How have I (we) treated those “ugly ducklings” in the congregation? As a prophet, a dreamer, how have I been treated? How do I (we) find and support the prophet? What is the prophet’s role in religious life? How does a person become a prophet? Are there specific growth and conversion steps for both the prophet and the group to which the prophet belongs?

SEASONS OF GROWTH

The emergence of the ugly duckling in religious life occurs when the potential prophet comes to the realization of being different from the others in the congregation—different in the sense of having a vision of religious life that is most often out of step with the status quo. This duckling loves the church and the congregation but just can’t swim the way the others do. Initially, the duckling tries to ignore the difference, the “ugliness” stigma of not going along with the status quo. Initially, too, leadership tries to accept such differences and see the peculiar beauty in the prophet’s vision of religious life. Soon tiring of the challenge this duckling presents, others withdraw their support, and the duckling is eventually marginalized by many in the group.

In late fall, as the duckling grows bigger and moves into adolescence, it makes the decision to “leave the barnyard and set off on its own” (a sense of drifting and searching—for what, for whom?). There is the dawning self-awareness of not being like the others and, as a result, a gradual, even reluctant movement away from the known and familiar to the unknown. Imperceptibly, in such isolation and aloneness, a self-acceptance of such difference begins. In this time of crisis, the duckling also considers leaving religious life, wondering whether all of this may indeed be a “sign” that he or she is called elsewhere.

In this late fall stage of the transition from ugly duckling to swan, the prophet realizes, after a period of time in religious life, that the passion for it remains and even grows, despite questions of one’s call to religious life. There is the realization that with the subtle and not-so-subtle snubbing and chasing by the wild ducks and geese (status-quo, “in-group” people at different levels of the pyramidal structures), the religious must leave the comfort of the “barnyard,” despite its marginalization, and listen to the desires deep within. Such leaving does not mean becoming an isolationist; rather, it is the beginning of creating boundaries, making larger horizons in order to attune more fully to the stirrings deep within. There is a sadness here because of the yearning to be accepted as one of the group.

Having made the decision to “move on,” the prophet goes to another group in the congregation where

there is a reputation for acceptance. Exhausted and relieved, he or she settles into this new environment. A wisdom figure may welcome the prophet, but soon the people already there become jealous and set about to get rid of him or her. Despite the respite of nurturing by the wisdom figure, the prophet knows that in order to stay centered deep within, he or she has to leave.

DARK NIGHT AND CRISIS

This wintry dark night of the soul experience—an integral part of the ego-honing process for the prophet—is that crisis time which holds both danger and hidden opportunity. There is a glimmer of hope, a glimmer of the beauty of the swan (symbolizing the integration of becoming a prophet), yet the duckling must go through that final danger, that letting go of the “my,” the ego hubris of my ideas, my plans, my dreams, in order to recognize and realize that this is God’s work as well (Ps. 127: “Unless God builds the house with me, I labor in vain”). The duckling is not yet ready to go with the swans because of the fear that they too will reject the duckling. The preparation, the honing time, is not over yet.

In Andersen’s story, as the duckling lay “dying,” alone and rejected, a kind farmer came along, “wrapped it in a blanket and took it home.” Again, brought back from the brink in this dangerous journey, the duckling revived, only to find the farmer’s children squabbling over who would nurse it back to health.

Throughout the conversion process, the prophet in the religious community learns how important boundaries are to staying grounded. Even when community members try to help, if they are not grounded, they will try to smother the duckling with kindness or become resentful when the duckling doesn’t live up to their expectations. How can the prophet find the hidden opportunity in this crisis? The duckling certainly had found the dangers, yet “somehow had survived the winter.”

BEGINNING TO MATURE

With new growth and the insights of this stage of springing forth into his or her true identity, the prophet is beginning to see what has been happening. The winter has been a season of reflection and introspection, fostering an in-depth appropriation of self as a prophet in the congregation. There is a dawning awareness and budding acceptance, during the conversion process, of being different, being the troublemaker—all part of the journey home to becoming a prophet. There is also the recognition that this metamorphosis is not something the prophet seeks.

It takes time for both personal as well as communal acceptance of this role.

BLOSSOMING INTO MATURITY

This final stage of conversion brings the religious to the maturation point of recognizing who she or he is after all. Even if the prophet's own congregation may never recognize the ugly duckling turned swan, the prophet, in order to stay faithful, will search out a support group. Bringing the mission of Jesus Christ, through reading the signs of the times, to those who will or can see the reflection of Christ in the ugly duckling turned swan, is the ongoing challenge of the prophet and the congregation.

Like the ugly duckling, the one called to be a prophet in religious life realizes that he or she is different, out of sync with the majority in the congregation. The prophet's initial response to this metanoia call may be one of denial, sadness, isolation, and rejection. In duckling fashion, the person tries to fit in, but to no avail. Like Jeremiah of old (1:7—"Ah God, I know not how to speak") and like Jesus (Matt. 26:36—"Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me"), the prophet gradually grows into this role.

ESSENCE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

As Joan Chittister writes in *The Fire in These Ashes*, "The purpose of religious life is not survival; it is prophecy." Well aware that religious life, in its essence, is a call to be prophetic, one might ask why many congregations seem to have had their prophetic edge dulled. Is it because of blindness and denial of the rather "obvious" signs of the times? An inward focus on survival? Ongoing but ineffective attempts (religious globalization?) to truly restructure? Forays into renewing foundering ministries with people too old and worn out? Futile efforts to replenish diminishing ranks in a model of religious life that is gone? Collusion with a consumeristic, big-business society deluged with advertising—slick vocational promotion on the Internet and billboards, complete with freebies such as website "addresses" and logo key chains, pens, and holy cards? Ongoing confusion between common life and community life?

Do such questions point to the extent to which religious life has moved away from its prophetic raison d'être as countercultural, in which it upholds and lives out, in sacred trust, those values and ideals for which all yearn? People are attracted to the prophetic, liminal essence of religious life—an essence that is not consonant with mass-media advertising blitzes. It is within such present-day confusion and drift that the prophet, the dreamer, is called.

TROUBLEMAKER SUSPECTED

Indeed, the whole subject of the prophet in religious life makes many people nervous. When facilitating groups on this theme, I hear comments like these: "In religious life, we are all called to be prophets." "Who would be so arrogant as to think that he or she is a prophet?" "We know his or her kind." "Peace disturber!" "Troublemaker!"

As the adage goes, "Every prophet disturbs, but not everyone who disturbs is a prophet." Indeed, the reality is that there are both true and false prophets everywhere, and religious life is no exception. It is by their works that we know them (Gal. 5:16–26). No one ever asks to be a prophet. Being prophetic is about challenging us to live the mission of Jesus Christ in radical and liminal ways.

Several euphemisms are used for the prophet, including dreamer, troublemaker, idealist, and pejorative appellations not usually seen in print. In labeling (a subtle form of violence?), we don't have to deal with the person because we "know" that person as stereotyped. Thus, we dismiss the person, and in so doing, we don't really listen to what he or she might be sharing. It is scary and disturbing to have a prophet in our midst.

PROPHETIC MODELS

For some, the role of prophet is something that was filled long ago, in Hebrew scripture times. Readily, names of these prophets come to mind. In Christian scripture times, the role of prophet would appear to be more of a challenge. Why is this so? Has it become superfluous, with Jesus the prophet par excellence? Some think not, pointing to a number of modern prophets: Gandhi; Dorothy Day; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mother Teresa; Romero; Jean Donovan and her companions. Readily recognizing these contemporary prophets, we ask why we can't seem to name them in religious life.

The trials and tribulations of most prophets are well known. It is no different for the prophets in religious life today; it was no different for Jesus. As a prophet, Jesus modeled the characteristics requisite to this role. He was not accepted either. As a carpenter's son, who did he think he was anyway? "And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not accepted in his own country'" (Matt. 13:56–57).

THE PROPHET'S BECOMING

Denunciation and Annunciation. In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann sum-

marizes the role of prophet as one of critic and dreamer of alternatives: “It is the task of the prophet to bring to expression the new realities against the more visible ones of the old order.” In other words, the prophetic role is one of both denunciation and annunciation. The prophet denounces what is death-dealing in a group, what is thwarting the reign of God in the present, in order to announce a new reality. Denunciation is not mere negativity, carping, and grousing. Rather, it arises from the silence and solitude of prayer, from which the prophet denounces any clinging to the status quo that might impede the coming of the new reign, as evident in the present signs of the times.

Poetic Imagination. The prophet announces that religious life is called forth to announce the new reign of God and, within that reign, religious life. Such annunciation comes from a prophetic and poetic imagination that sees things differently. “Indeed, poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality,” Brueggemann writes. “In our achieved satiation we have neither the wits nor the energy nor the courage to think freely about imagined alternative futures.”

In dreaming about alternative futures, the prophet has a passionate commitment to the insights gleaned in his or her desert times. These are the liminal values and ideals needed to challenge the status quo. “Liminality is not something one sets out to create,” notes Diarmuid O’Murchu in his book *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*. “Rather, it is the product of the creative imagination, seeking to respond to the pressing needs of the contemporary world, fueled by a new vision of the future.” And these values are announced in the poetry of the creative prophetic imagination, in stark contrast to the staid prose of the reality being denounced. Monika Hellwig, author of *Christian Women in a Troubled World*, writes, “The dynamics of the prophetic are in the creative imagination. . . . A fundamental task of Christian spirituality is imagination. It is the task of breaking the process of interpretation wide open to glimpse entirely new and different possibilities of human life and relationships.”

Deep Prayer Life. Because it is a call that requires a searing response, the prophetic call must be nurtured in a deep life of prayer. Within the context of the congregation, the prophet is a loving critic and a critical lover whose vision and challenge are rooted, grounded, and supported in a life of prayer, silence, and solitude. With healthy but definite boundaries, the prophet is neither an isolationist nor a member

of the “in group.” This helps the person keep focused by not getting drawn into the in group, particularly when loneliness and marginalization become unbearable. Being on the outside—on the margins of all groups, yet able to move in those same groups as a bridge builder—the prophet, in seeing things more clearly, can call people forth to a gospel radicality.

Loving Critic, Critical Lover. As both a loving critic and a critical lover, the prophet challenges the institutional status quo in its mediocre response to the gospel. The role of the prophet is neither apocalyptic nor one of foretelling the future. Rather, it is about reading the signs of the times in the present, in the here and now. It is about dreaming dreams about how things need to be now.

The prophet loves deeply, and his or her challenge comes out of that love. The prophet loves both church and congregation in their pristine potential for building the new reign of God. The prophetic call, then, is personal, communal, even cosmic. In challenging the status quo, the prophet has the additional challenge of being a community builder and a bridge builder between what was and what has to be. In this capacity, the prophet attempts to foster cooperation, mutuality, interdependence, and compassion. The new reign is one in which all are integral to the message. As a risk taker and a challenger, the prophet calls others forth in the name of justice, right relationships, and the new reign. Through compassionate listening and a loving stance, he or she is able to read the signs of the times in the present, with the eyes of a gospel cosmic vision.

Perseverance and Tolerance for Failure. A hard worker with a high tolerance for failure, the prophet has acquired perseverance to follow these dreams and ideals. As a prophet, the person may be in conflict, at odds with the official leaders and structures of the congregation—indeed, of the church. So many times, the prophet is out of sync with the felt readiness for change in the group. Often, when the passionate dreamer shares a dream with the group, it is rejected. Then, at some point down the road, another member of the community or church who is more part of the in group may suggest the very thing the dreamer suggested, and it is then accepted, even applauded. At this point, very few remember that it was the “troublemaker” who originally suggested the proposal.

“Mine” to “Ours.” In the prophetic call, the focus is on the message, not on the prophet. Being

CONGREGATIONAL ACCEPTANCE

In research I conducted in 1993, I asked Canadian women religious to explore the acceptance of the prophet in their congregations. Respondents in this survey were simply given the statement, "I think our prophets are/are not accepted (circle one) in my congregation because . . ." I did not define *prophet* in the research. My intent was to have people start thinking about the prophet in religious life along the several notions of the prophet in a congregation, knowing from Galatians (5:61–26) that "by their gifts you will know them." Forty-five (45) of the 85 respondents said the prophets were not accepted, while 34 thought they were accepted and 6 were unsure or didn't know. The responses focused on both the personal qualities of the prophet and the communal acceptance or nonacceptance of the prophet.

On the one hand, some saw the prophet as too radical, immature, angry, or ahead of her time, as a troublemaker whose personal life did not fit the congregation's image of how a prophet must look and act. On the other hand, the prophet was seen as loving the church and religious life with a vision of how things need to change in order to live the gospel in radical, liminal ways.

A number of the respondents focused on the congregation's attitudes about the prophet in their midst. In some instances they felt threatened by the radicality of the prophet because they were challenged to change; they didn't understand or want to take the risks of moving into the unknown. In other instances there was a sense that some congregations were recognizing the prophetic stance more. Some suggested that this was due in part to the role of leadership in their congregations, which has been open to new ideas and models about the future of religious life. A number have accepted the prophet, transforming their fear of change into the realization that change is essential for the future of religious life. There appeared to be an understanding that unless they accepted the prophetic stance, their congregations would die.

Because no common language to speak about the prophet in religious life appears to exist, there were no major differences in the data between those who thought the prophets were accepted and those who thought they weren't. In fact, contradictions appeared among the different responses from various congregations across the country. For example, a reason given by some for acceptance ("They are respected and listened to") was the reason given by others for rejection ("We are not ready to hear what they are saying").

In the light of these data and the seeming lack of awareness in congregations about the prophet in

prophetic is a conversion movement from "mine" to "ours." The dreamer's conversion process is a honing of the ego, a letting go. It must happen over and over in a movement in which the prophet's dreams are no longer just "mine." With the congregation or the group accepting the dream, the message of the messenger becomes everyone's; it becomes "ours." At this point, the potential prophet becomes a prophet in his or her acceptance by the group; it is the realization of the conversion process for both parties. Stripped of hubris, the prophet recognizes that the focus is on the message, not on the messenger. It is as though the prophet has given birth to a baby (a new idea or vision, a needed change) and then must give it up for adoption, knowing that he or she will be given little or no credit as the birth parent. In fact, as it was for the shaman—the religious healer of old, who fully became shaman only when accepted by the group—so it is for the prophet. The group must eventually accept a particular person in the role of prophet, even if the group doesn't like the prophet or his or her message. In his book *Reframing Religious Life*, O'Murchu writes that "recognition as a shaman is bestowed only by the whole community and many aspiring shamans renounce the profession if the clan does not grant unanimous approval."

Courageous in Marginalization. Courageous, the prophet learns to live into being isolated and marginalized. Over time, the prophet also learns to endure the disrespect and criticism that his or her passion engenders for what must be in the name of the gospel. With little need for ongoing affirmation, the prophet can, for the most part, withstand the criticism, rejection, and loneliness, cognizant at a deeper level of awareness that "I am not alone because God is with me" (John 16:32). The willingness to risk criticism and disapproval, and the courage to say what needs to be said, come from a passionate, compassionate gospel reading of the signs of the times. The prophet as bridge-builder helps span the gap between what is and what must be.

Self-Acceptance. In the ongoing converting that is integral to this call-response, the prophet comes home fully to who he or she is, and cannot do otherwise but follow his or her dreams and ideals. The creative prophetic imagination builds a passionate commitment to these dreams and insights, even when sharing them brings rejection. At times, despite the commitment, compassion, and hard work, the prophet may be in conflict with the official leaders in the congregation and, at times, even in the institutional church.

their midst, I propose a conversion process that is integral to a congregation's accepting the prophet. It is my conviction that every congregation attempting to read the signs of the times has a potential prophet. Also, it is only with the community's acceptance of the prophet in its midst that there can be a refounding of the congregation. Otherwise, there will continue to be more renewal—a kind of cosmetic, Band-Aid approach to reading the signs of the times.

CONGREGATIONAL CONVERSION

Providing an atmosphere in which the prophet can emerge and grow in a congregation is one of the most important roles of leadership. A second important role of leadership is providing that sacred space and encouragement for congregational acceptance of the prophet. This conversioning also takes time in a journeying through a number of stages:

Ignoring. Change is difficult for most of us; institutional change seems even harder because the status quo is what seemingly holds the structure together. In religious life, when a member is out of sync with the institutional status quo and challenges us in ways that make us uncomfortable, we ignore that person. Our childhood and adult experiences have taught us that one way to eliminate unwanted behavior is to ignore the troublemaker. Because of the need we all have for acceptance, this works in many instances. There is one salient difference, however. The ugly duckling, the troublemaker, does not go away, despite the ignoring, belittling, and gossiping about his or her latest idea or dream. The prophet has more resilience than most of us. The prophet can live with little affirmation.

Rejection. There would appear to be a point at which indifference, teasing, and making fun of the ugly duckling all turn into outright rejection when the duckling's denunciation and annunciation continue. Rejection follows; the prophet is contradicted, scorned, marginalized, and excluded from committees and groups in which congregational planning and decision making happen. A suggestion or proposal offered by the prophet tends to be rejected—if not outright, then subtly, by verbal or written “recognition” but nothing else, from committees, groups, or leadership. Follow-up or action may not happen for some time—usually five to seven years. When follow-up does happen, the suggestion comes from the group itself.

This is the crisis point for the group. There is the unspoken hope by many, including leadership, that the prophet, in conflict with the official leadership,

will leave the congregation. How the congregation moves through this stage determines whether it reaches acceptance of the troublemaker. If the focus is solely on the danger aspect of the crisis with this troublemaker and not on its hidden opportunity, then such a person cannot be prophetic in that group. Examples abound in which a prophet, while staying in a congregation, moves out to other religious congregations and becomes prophetic outside his or her own group, confirming Jesus' words: “The prophet is not accepted in his own country.”

If the congregation can see the hidden opportunity in this crisis, then with the help of leadership (see my article on “The Leadership Dance,” HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, Fall 1998), the conversion process continues with a breakthrough.

Breakthrough. Time, conversion, and maturation for both the prophet and the rest of the group signal a breakthrough. In the process, many emotions are experienced—especially fear, frustration, anger, and sadness—yet the gifts of the Spirit become more and more evident in the maturation process of the troublemaker. There is a centeredness, prayerfulness, and passionate compassion for religious life that the congregation can no longer ignore. Gradually, too (over years, at times), the congregation begins to see the prophet in a different light, and then these gifts of the Spirit are evident in the group and its acceptance of this dreamer: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5: 22–23). Sometimes the congregational conversion is helped along by outside groups—religious congregations and others—who have long since recognized the person as a prophet.

Acceptance. Acceptance of the ugly duckling in the congregation at this point is conditional, gradual, and even reluctant. Many times it is given by a select few at the grassroots level who can influence others in the group. Sometimes this acceptance happens at the time of a chapter and chapter elections, when the group or a person in the group tells the ugly duckling that he or she is a prophet. Specifically, the prophet cannot be part of present-day administration or management teams elected to leadership because his or her values challenge the status quo that these groups uphold, with their primary focus on the maintenance tasks of administration and management rather than the visioning of leadership.

The ugly duckling turned swan is named such by one or more persons in his or her own congregation, but at other times the prophet is told by some-

one in another congregation or group. In most cases, by the time group acceptance happens, the ugly duckling has already come home to this realization and to a personal acceptance of this call-response gift. However, as with the shamans of old, when there is acceptance in the congregation by the actual naming of the person as prophet, the group moves to the last stage of its conversion process: that of respect.

Respect. With full acceptance of the prophet in a congregation there comes respect—respect with appreciation. The prophet never becomes part of any given group, but there is a recognition that this person is “bona fide.” This respect seems to carry a sort of uneasiness; it is respect at a distance for many in the group, because the ugly duckling turned swan is always pushing the boundaries. Indeed, the prophet is both the loving critic and the critical lover.

PROPHETS CAN HELP REFOUND

During years of working with different groups, I have attempted to fine-tune my descriptions of the conversion-growth stages undergone by both the prophet and the congregation in which the prophet is a member. It is my hope that these reflections, using the metaphor of the ugly duckling, will both invite and challenge congregations to come home to this critical issue.

At this point in the life cycle of our congregations, in the midst of our chaos, it is time to refound, not renew. All our well-intentioned renewal efforts have focused on “cosmetic” changes; only refounding deals with the core issue of religious life, the prophetic. The prophets in our congregations can be the bridge builders in this. It is paramount that both leaders and followers work together to find the ugly ducklings in their midst—the ones who can’t swim in the muddy waters of the status quo but who become capable of gliding on to new horizons—horizons of a quantum universe in which right relationships and justice are contextualized within the liminal values of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The following questions, as well as the ones posed at the beginning of this article, may start reflections or discussions that can help congregations recognize the ugly ducklings in their midst:

- Who is/are the prophet(s) in your congregation?
- How do you react or respond to them? Why?
- Has anyone ever told you that you are a dreamer, troublemaker, ugly duckling? Who? When? Why?
- Do you think you are a prophet? Why?
- Why are prophets not talked about or supported in your congregation? (or Why are they talked about and supported?)
- Why do we need ugly ducklings in religious life today? What are they telling us we need to do? Who are they telling us we need to be?

RECOMMENDED READING

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Cultures, Spiritualities, and the Church

Egan Hunter, C.S.C.

Our contemporary world, composed of diverse peoples of various racial, ethnic, religious, and other groupings, is a very complex world. It is difficult to retain Catholic and Christian unity while fulfilling the needs and requirements within the plurality of cultural traditions. How does the church maintain harmony between and among multiple cultures while safeguarding the unifying essentials of Christian teaching and theology? We are called to be witnesses to Jesus, not only to our Christian brethren but to non-Christians as well. Ours is a calling to evangelization. Saint Paul expressed the Christian community's vocational call in the following words: "May [God] enlighten your innermost vision that you may know the great hope to which he has called you, the wealth of his glorious heritage to be distributed among the members of the church, and the immeasurable scope of his power in us who believe" (Eph. 1:17-19).

In fulfillment of this call, the Second Vatican Council evaluated the events arising from other cultures coming into contact with our missionary call and raising the question of spiritual diversity as it relates to that call. As Walter Abbott points out in *The Documents of Vatican II*, the council fathers were anxious and concerned. In *Lumen Gentium* they formulated a series of questions: What must be done to prevent

the increased exchange among cultures from disturbing the life of existing communities and destroying existing cultural heritage? How do we provide for this interaction leading to true and fruitful dialogue among groups and nations without jeopardizing the vital uniqueness of each group? How can the vitality and growth of an emerging culture be fostered without the loss of our fidelity to the heritage of Christian tradition?

The council fathers suggested that we have a duty to work with all peoples in constructing a more human world. They believe that the mystery of our Christian faith furnishes us with excellent incentives to achieve these goals. They believe that by incorporating the various disciplines of philosophy, history, mathematics, natural science, and the arts, the human family will be elevated to a more sublime understanding of the truth, goodness, and beauty that lay the foundations of our judgments involving universal values.

In recognition of the multiple aspects of all human knowledge and culture, we will be enabled to live more closely with the peoples populating our own times. We will be enabled to take advantage of existing connections linking the message of salvation to multiple human cultures. History tells us that God has manifested Himself in different manners in

We must prepare current and future generations to meet the physical, moral, and spiritual demands of the unknown world of the new millennium

order to meet the requirements of changing cultures. We need to probe and explore diverse cultures and their spiritualities in our effort to understand as well as to discover the enriching contributions each can make to our knowledge of and insights into eternal things. Then we must blend these insights into existing westernized liturgical celebrations and methods of prayer.

PREPARING FOR FUTURE

What modifications must be made in the contemporary church to prepare its members to confront the requirements related to the cultural and spiritual realities of tomorrow's church? We must remain vital witnesses to the world of the beatific principles of Jesus' message. We must prepare current and future generations to meet the physical, moral, and spiritual demands of the unknown world of the new millennium.

The touchstone lies within our abilities to adapt existing expressions of spirituality, based on our westernized philosophies and traditions, to the evolving challenges of the contemporary church. In this process of modifying and discarding, we will discover a reclaiming and a reworking of traditional treasures. We will discover new ministry roles, new means of evangelization, that open new avenues, structures, and blendings of various spiritual and cultural traditions. We must be open to translating New Testament norms into logical and pastoral applications that meet the challenges of our emerging multicultural worlds.

The blending of culture and spirituality brings about a refining and developing of our diverse mental and physical endowment. This blending is expressed through the creative spiritual experiences and aspirations of all people throughout the ages. Peoples are shaped by their cultures while shaping and molding the basic standards and characteristics of their enfolding heritages. A richer and deeper interchange must take place among nations and cultures, among differing branches of society, resulting in an enrichment while preserving the critical and essential characteristics of each culture.

The Vatican Council noted the emergence of new forms of living, of a new age in human history characterized by change in the social and cultural dimensions. Rather than fearing these changes, they encouraged the church to explore the wider diffusion of cultures and spiritualities, making use of advancements in knowledge, science, and technology to aid in the enrichment of human and spiritual self-actualization.

This blending of human cultures in the church's response to the surrounding diversity of traditional patrimonies and spiritualities results in cross-pollination. Spirituality is not exclusively Christian. All religions possess their own spiritualities, centering on a state of mind opposed to materialism and secularism, and centering on the supernatural as opposed to natural goodness. The Native American form of spirituality is an expression of human relationship to the Great Spirit, governing the ways in which people live in harmony with the creative life forces of nature, and emphasizing that man belongs to the earth rather than the earth belonging to man. Buddhism's spirituality is more meditative and reflective than Western spirituality. Christian spirituality is basically a synthesis of two creative traditions, the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman.

The dilemma confronting contemporary spirituality is how to respond creatively to the call of the church today, how to meet the demands of that unknown world of the new millennium. The key lies in our abilities to innovate and adapt existing ministries into new ministries and apostolates, to generate new forms of liturgical expression incorporating the multicultural aspects of an expanding worldwide Catholic church.

HISTORICAL DILEMMA

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit endowed the assembled apostles with the gift of speaking various languages. Many of those hearing them were confused when these Hebrew apostles began proclaiming to the various assemblies the Good News in their own

languages (Acts 2:3–6). The early church in Jerusalem soon addressed the issue arising from this clash of cultures. In the Acts of the Apostles (15), we see an attempt in the founding apostolic church to require all in the merging Christian church—Jews and gentiles alike—to fulfill the mandates of Mosaic law. Recognizing the cultural concern, Saint Paul convinced the early church that it was not justified in requiring gentile members to observe all the traditions and practices arising strictly from Hebrew historical traditions and practices. Thus, gentiles were not required to undergo circumcision. Yet gray areas existed. In Acts 16:1–4, Paul required Timothy to be circumcised before undertaking his active apostolate, as Timothy's father was Greek but his mother was Jewish. This was done so his activities and mission would be acceptable in both the Jewish and gentile communities.

When Peter and Paul transferred the center of their activities to Rome, the early church faced other cultural transitions and adjustments in areas not affecting faith and morals. Liturgical vestments began to be patterned along Roman styles and models. Classical philosophy and wisdom—drawn from the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans—became intertwined with and supportive of Christian teachings and traditions while remaining faithful to the teachings of the apostolic period. As the church grew, the traditional synagogue building design slowly yielded to the Roman basilican format. The Catholic church took on the many local traditions and appearances characteristic of the people being served. The Latin or Roman rite was not exclusively the liturgical norm. Authorized rites meeting the cultural and spiritual needs of specific worshiping communities emerged: the Ambrosian, Mozarabic, and Dominican rites, along with those associated with the Eastern Church—the Byzantine, Syrian, Armenian, Maronite, Chaldean, and Coptic rites. Always this was done carefully. The emergence of a new religious culture was not to be at the cost of the fidelity of our heritage or the deposit of faith.

Unfortunately, this willingness and openness to accommodate other creative traditions and spiritualities was not always the operative principle. At times tragedy struck as the encountering of differing cultures and traditions became controlled by and measured against a prejudiced premise. In some minds, anything that was not European had to be primitive or savage. Fortunately, this closed-minded attitude was not universal. The Crusaders, who traveled to the Middle East in the hope of liberating the holy sites, discovered advances in medicine, mathematics, and the like previously unknown to the West and brought them back to their homelands.

Beginning in the eighth century, the Moors invaded Spain, following Charlemagne's retreating army. They established centers of scholarship, drawing heavily upon the works of Arab scientists and Greek philosophers. Schools and libraries were founded and became marvels of the Western world. It was the blending of such traditions that transmitted much of Eastern thought and learning through Spain and into the Christian West. Unlike earlier conquerors, the Moors were not merely copyists; they transformed this mingling of Eastern and Western traditions. They not only brought with them the richness of Eastern thought and wisdom but also embraced and incorporated the wealth of Western thought. The Cordoba caliphates permitted a measure of religious freedom for both the Christians and Jews of Spain. The mingling of Christian and Moorish architectural elements produced two unique hybrid styles, Mozarabic and Mudjar, which laid the foundation for the Spanish romanesque. This mingling of Mozarabic and Christian elements became characteristic of Christian buildings erected under Moorish rule.

A historical error in judgment emerged when the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile, united under Ferdinand and Isabella, strove to draw all Spain under the jurisdiction of the Catholic monarchs. As part of this reunification process, the fateful decision was made that both the Moslems and Jews were to be expelled from Spain if they did not become Christian. Wishing to reaffirm the Spanish image over their territories, the monarchs returned to a narrow vision. Anything that did not have its source in either Spanish or European Christian cultures, traditions, and knowledge was suspect as heathen, irrational, or ignorant and considered to have nothing of value to contribute to Western civilization or Christian thought. This was a step backward, resulting in great intellectual, cultural, and spiritual losses to Spain and to the church.

This prejudice was quite evident in the attitude of the Spanish explorers toward the pre-Columbian cultures and civilizations in the New World. Their encountering and confronting of differing cultural traditions presented an opportunity to blend the best of both in an expanded and enriched entity, but what happened? The ancient Maya, Toltec, Aztec, Inca, and neighboring civilizations were not recognized for their high levels of culture and knowledge. In many ways the wisdom of these civilizations was far advanced beyond that of contemporary Europe. The pre-Columbian cultures had much to offer the invading Spanish. Unfortunately, however, the Conquistadors viewed them as substandard, uncivilized, barbaric cultures needing to be extinguished. Systematically, they began to erase from these civiliza-

The task before us is the development of a theology of diversity that reaches out to all peoples and cultures

tions and cultures all forms and concepts differing from their own. Mayan and Aztec palaces and temples—marvels of architecture—were leveled. The stones were used to produce European-style buildings and churches, forms totally foreign and alien to the local peoples. The libraries of knowledge—social, scientific, mathematical, religious—were burned. This wealth of knowledge was cast aside and lost rather than blended with Spanish culture and knowledge. The Spanish came seeking material gold and destroyed a much richer and greater treasure. Only today are we beginning to recognize the tragedy of this lost wisdom and what it might have offered to Spain and to sixteenth-century Western civilization. In addition, the evangelization of the missionaries was subjected in many ways to the goals, norms, and objectives of the secular government. The official liturgy was alien to the indigenous populations. This was counterproductive to the cultivation of a deep, authentic inculcation of religious traditions and the shaping of liturgical expression into a spirituality more easily understood by these people, who perceived the church as distant, foreign, and suspect.

At the same time, a totally different message was delivered to these pre-Columbian peoples through the apparitions of Our Lady. It was her desire to reach out to her children of the New World in a meaningful manner. Thus, she appeared as a young Aztec maiden, dressed in traditional Aztec garb, even wearing the black belt traditionally worn by Aztec women to indicate their motherhood. Mary sent a powerful symbolic message cloaked in a form not foreign to their culture and easily understood by the indigenous peoples of Central America. They rapidly came to know that she was the Mother of all peoples.

Through their understanding and absorbing of her message, they took Our Lady of Guadalupe as one of themselves. At the same time, none of this did any violence to the basic impact of the Christian message.

Turning our eyes to the East, we encounter attempts to blend European religious traditions with the mystical and symbolical teachings of the Orient. We all know the story of Marco Polo's journey to imperial China and the benefits that resulted from that encounter of two cultural traditions. Toward the end of the 1500s, another glorious mixing of Eastern and Western thought, religions, philosophies, and science took place, primarily through the work of the Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci, a pioneer in cultural relations between Europe and China. In China he encountered the richness of a civilization reaching back to a time around 1200 BC. Because of a long-standing policy of the Middle Kingdom, sixteenth-century China basically was sealed off to all non-Chinese. Efforts had to be made to lessen the Chinese suspicions of outsiders and their intent. Alessandro Valignano formulated a bold and farsighted plan to break through China's isolation by confronting the intellectual aristocracy at its own level of language, social customs, and knowledge. Never forgetting his spiritual purpose, Ricci undertook this task through the approach of exciting the Chinese intellectuals by incorporating various forms of Western thought and culture into Eastern thought and knowledge. Work was undertaken first in the Kwangtung province, where the missionaries strove to lessen the questioning of Westerners' intent by adopting the garb of Buddhist monks and constructing their first church in the Chinese style of architecture. Ricci's reputation as a scientist and scholar rapidly grew. He strove to become knowledgeable of and conversant with the works of Confucius and Lao-Tzi, whose philosophies formed the foundation of Chinese life, religion, and spirituality. Like Saint Paul, who used Roman and Greek concepts as a springboard to the preaching of the Christian message, Ricci used the familiar tenets of Chinese philosophy as the means of introducing his religious message. Thus, his efforts to blend Eastern and Western thought through an expansion and diffusion of the riches of both traditions succeeded via his writing and teachings on mathematics, religion, and literature.

After a change in viceroys, Ricci shifted his activities northward to imperial Beijing. Finding his Buddhist dress a hindrance in working with students of Confucius, he now assumed the dress of the scholarly mandarins. He found a receptive audience in the imperial court, where intellectuals were interested in modernization. They welcomed his teachings in religion, astronomy, mathematics, and physics. Ricci

was a rare combination of Renaissance humanism and profound appreciation of and respect for Chinese cultural and moral values. Symbolism became important in the process he called his "accommodation method." He recognized that European concepts and beliefs did not always carry symbolic meaning or impact among the Chinese. He was given the freedom to make necessary modifications in Catholic liturgical practices to meet the intellectual and psychological needs of the Chinese, as long as these did not conflict with any of the basic truths and concepts of Christianity. Thus the liturgy and church architecture assumed an Oriental flavor. This process enabled the apostles to achieve success in early Christianity by adapting Greek and Roman traditions and thought not contrary to Christian beliefs. More recently, Mother Theresa of Calcutta made similar adaptations in her mode of dress and lifestyle in order to be accepted and trusted by the poor she served.

Unfortunately, the freedom to make these modest modifications in religious externals was rejected by church officials in Rome shortly after the death of Ricci. They failed to recognize the wisdom and necessity of blending these two cultural, creative traditions in a new, vital form. They feared that such actions would lessen the Christian message. The church in China resumed a Western look in vestments, ceremonies, and architecture. Westernizing was characteristic of other Christian missionaries as well. Tragically, thus ended the grand experiment of Matteo Ricci and his associates.

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

The impact of this decision did not become clear until contemporary times, when Mao Zedong desired to end what he saw as domination by the powerful West. As Christianity exhibited all the basic external characteristics of the West, it was easy to condemn it as a foreign intrusion. Again, a distrust of any culture or tradition alien to one's own became the touchstone of Chinese actions. All thing Western had to be expelled.

It was not until the 1960s that this fateful Western error in judgment was recognized and reversed. Vatican Council II, in its *Constitution of the Liturgy*, stated that as long as the essence of worship was protected, modifications in liturgical practices and buildings could be allowed and encouraged for legitimate variations and adaptations to cultural differences in groups, regions, and peoples. Thus the concepts and flexibility of Ricci's "accommodation method" were restored. Even so, it took nearly four hundred years for the wisdom of cultural accommodation to be recognized. Unfortunately for the church in China, these new insights of inculturation, these

new freedoms in religious expression and worship, have never been experienced. The wall of silence separating Chinese Catholics from Rome, erected by the Cultural Revolution, remains in place.

RELUCTANCE TO CHANGE

It is easy for many to accept theory, yet it is difficult to implement the resultant cultural modifications. Even though attitudes have changed since Vatican Council II, resistance to change remains present. People are hesitant to change. Many prefer retention of the familiar, the traditional. Many have become satisfied with the current revised liturgical practices and the various means of expressing our spiritualities as more conformable to one's way of life, to one's cultural and societal norms. Thus there is resistance to further modifications, for whatever reason. Valid reasoning tends to fall upon deaf ears.

Many wonderful things in liturgical reforms and practices have been achieved by the post-Vatican II church. As a pilgrim people, we still have much of the road of faith and renewal to travel. The faithful of the world must struggle to understand and to perfect mutual ways of thinking and feeling as expressed through multiple cultures. Bishop Hadisumarta of Indonesia reminded the delegates to the Synod of Asian Bishops (1998) that

the Second Vatican Council set forth a vision of the Catholic Church as a communion of Churches, a communion of communities. . . . The faith is one, its expression manifold. Catholicity is enriched by the variety of local Churches, each rooted in its local context, each in living contact with each other. The Catholic Church is not a monolithic pyramid. We are a communion of local Churches.

The Vatican Council provides us with a directive for the modification of our social living in our international relations, in our religious and liturgical lives:

Various conditions of community living, as well as various patterns . . . arise from diverse ways of . . . expressing oneself, of perceiving religion, of forming customs, of establishing laws and juridical institutions, of advancing the arts and sciences, and of promoting beauty. Thus the customs handed down to it form for each human community its proper patrimony . . . [enfolding] the men of every nation and age and from which they draw the values [permitting] them to promote human and civic culture. (Abbott, W., ed., *Documents of Vatican II*)

Recognizing that this is not an easy task, the Council raised three serious questions related to the subsequent difficulties that would emerge:

We must remain one in our faith, safeguarding the essential elements of Christian teaching and theology, our common heritage

(1) What must be done to prevent the increased exchanges between cultures . . . from disturbing the life of communities, destroying ancestral wisdom, or jeopardizing the uniqueness of each people? (2) How can the vitality and growth of a new culture be fostered without the loss of living fidelity to the heritage of tradition? (3) What can be done to make all men on earth share in the culture of other men of good will [so that] when difficulties arise, Christians will provide, on behalf of family life, necessities which are suitably modern?

The task before us is the development of a theology of diversity that reaches out to all peoples and cultures. We need to develop a pastoral theology of change. A living church is an evolving body. As a vital, living entity, the church cannot stagnate, become moribund, or be unbending and inflexible in meeting the spiritual pastoral needs of its members. A living church is a missionary body reaching out in a meaningful way to a very diverse world. Jesus told us that "In my Father's house, there are many mansions" (John 14:2). There is a heavenly provision for housing many cultures, spiritualities, and traditions. There are many diverse cultural branches, yet one common, nourishing central vine of faith. The one and the many are enriched by the variety of local churches, nourished in their own spiritual cultures and traditions, convergently rooted in a common source. It is truly a communion of local churches. Within these multiple mansions, there is provision for cultural and spiritual difference and diversity while retaining that critical unity required in our witness role to the Good News. After years of religious and liturgical experimentation, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides us with additional guidelines:

In the communion of saints, many and varied *spiritualities* have been developed throughout the history of the churches . . . so that their followers may have a share in this spirit. A distinct spirituality can also arise at the point of convergence of liturgical and theological currents, bearing witness to the integration of the faith into a particular human environment and its history. . . . In their rich diversity they are reflections of one pure light of the Holy Spirit.

In the development of our theology of diversity, our theology of pastoral change, there exists a three-fold relationship among liturgical norms. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the celebration of the liturgy must correspond to the "genius and culture of the different peoples." The "mystery of Christ must be proclaimed, celebrated and lived . . . in such a way [that the involved peoples] themselves are not abolished by it, but redeemed and fulfilled." Second, it must be recognized that the sacraments are composed of immutable parts divinely instituted and parts that can be changed. Third, it must be recognized that diversity can be a "source of enrichment as well as provoking tensions, mutual misunderstanding and even schisms." Such adaptations must "express only fidelity to the common faith, to the sacramental signs that the Church has received from Christ, and to hierarchical communion." Such adaptations may require, when necessary, "a breaking with ancestral customs incompatible with the Catholic faith."

On this journey of faith toward the blending and commingling of many cultures and traditions into our spiritualities and liturgies, we are a pilgrim people *in via*. We have not yet achieved a finalized form and may never do so. In our development of a theology of pastoral change within a living church, what still lies ahead in this regard? What additional religious freedoms will be required to accommodate the cultures and traditions of other peoples, especially in Africa and Asia, Europe, North and South America?

SYNOD CLARIFIES AIMS

In the spring of 1998 the Synod for Asia was called by Pope John Paul II. The many positions presented by the Asian bishops underscored that fact that we have not yet achieved the ideal of mutual trust and understanding required in the blending of cultural traditions. These bishops—their voices echoing those of the earlier Synod for Africa—spoke of new ways of being church, of the need for greater cultural sensitivity and diversity in religious expression. They stressed the need for greater cooperation with other religious bodies of Asia in a joint effort to meet the social and economic crises characteristic of their

regions and times. Reaching across the centuries, their appeal echoed that of Matteo Ricci, along with the wisdom of other earlier missionaries. A sincere desire is being voiced to incorporate many of our Western Catholic systems of beliefs, spiritualities, and liturgical worship with those that are not foreign or strange to the people of Asia, thus achieving a greater Catholic diversity without fracturing unity.

Archbishop Garmou, coadjutor of Teheran, pleaded for a greater degree of freedom in the exercise of mystical contemplation. Our failure to achieve this in the past has lead to "many ruptures in the Church of Christ in Asia since the early centuries." He advocated a "transfiguration by the Spirit evoking the mysteries of the Liturgy, the avoidance of concepts alien to Asian ways of thinking," while giving "priority to adoration," as the mode of Asian theology is, "above all, contemplative, mystical."

Archbishop Ada' of Indonesia highlighted norms that need to be addressed by other cultures. He said that the "official liturgy," to many Asian Catholics, often remained an alien ceremony that did not "touch the heart." The wellspring of their prayer life lay elsewhere, in "popular religiosity or in the traditional religions." He proposed that the local churches be given more freedom to shape a liturgy that can easily be lived by Asian peoples while bearing the responsibility for "cultivating a deeper authentic inculturation in dialogue with traditional religions or popular religiosity." This should be a "spirituality of sincere tolerance and dialogue, harmony and sisterhood/brotherhood."

A similar plea was expressed by Archbishop Shimamoto of Nagasaki to free Christianity from unnecessary European cultural overtones that ignore "the culture of the people to whom the gospel is preached." In the Asian cultural context, "evangelization must progress through the gradual shedding of European cultural features . . . otherwise Christianity would always be a 'foreign religion' for the people of Asia." He stressed that this does not imply "separation from the Catholic faith, since inculturation is promoted while firmly retaining the deposit of faith." The resultant liturgy "is the public prayer of God's People in Asia (and) should be an expression which corresponds more closely with the soul of the Asian people who pray and adore the God of Jesus Christ."

Asian bishops expounded the central theme that there must be a realistic and effective blending of Western and Eastern thought, of spiritualities. The message of these Asian bishops was that there needs to be greater freedom in the celebration of the liturgy, responding to the cultural and spiritual heritages of differing peoples. Their concern relates not only to

the peoples of Asia but also to indigenous peoples everywhere. Diverse traditions arise as the church expands and carries its mission into many geographic and cultural areas. It is through the liturgy of these local churches that the light of Jesus is nourished and his salvation message becomes manifest and meaningful to the diverse cultures and spiritual heritages to which the church is being sent. This accommodation and adaptation must become integrated into the church's universal unity. In the worldwide communion of saints and of churches, there will be generated many and varied spiritualities, a mutual sharing of living traditions incorporating a multitude of prayer forms while maintaining the requisite unity under the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Only in this manner will the mandate and vision of the Second Vatican Council reach fulfillment.

Some in our own country may say that these concerns relate only to the liturgical and spiritual needs of the emerging Third World and do not relate to our American circumstance. They point out the many innovations and modifications achieved within the American Catholic church as sufficient to bring our liturgies and expressions of spirituality into tune with our own times, our own peoples. They do not understand the theology of diversity and the theology of pastoral change. They are complacent about past accomplishments without realizing that their very attitude is slowly closing the window of liturgical reform opened by Pope John XXIII. We need to ask, Is this all that is needed? As a vital, living church, have we no continuing and emerging concerns of adaptation and accommodation that need to be addressed?

AMERICAN CHURCH MUST ADAPT

The composition of our American society is changing radically. It is rapidly becoming evident that the Anglo-European community will no longer be the majority. A combination of minorities is assuming majority leadership. What message does this contain for us? Will what we have accomplished in the past serve adequately the religious and spiritual needs of these emerging minorities within our American society?

Now is the time to reach out and embrace many of the cultural and spiritual gems overlooked previously. The Catholic church in America cannot be envisioned as a single mode of worship if it is to continue fulfilling its universal mandate. We must be enlightened by a vision of the contributive and creative heritages arising from multiple cultural traditions as a means of enriching our common spiritual destinies. It is through our openness and responsiveness to the embracing of the liturgical and spiritual needs of our

nation's diverse peoples that we will achieve a communion of many local praying churches nourished by these multiple cultures and traditions while retaining our common faith.

God reveals Himself to the human race through various modes of culture related to different ages and to different localities. There is strong evidence that our reformed, contemporary expression of the salvation message is not presenting a welcoming approach to some peoples of other traditions. Traditionally, the Hispanic community has been identified as Catholic. In reality, many Hispanics are leaving their church of origin, which they now conceive as alien and unreceptive to their spiritual needs. They are attracted to alternate forms of Hispanic spiritualities in more evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic non-Catholic churches. Many within the African American community find current Catholic liturgies and customs unresponsive to their spiritual needs. How do we reach out to this diversity with the revelation and message that our faith is one while permitting its expression to be manifold? How do we adapt our spiritualities to meet the cultural requirements of these multiple social communities within the American Catholic church? Suddenly, it begins to become clear. The need to develop a theology of diversity and a theology of pastoral change is not solely a concern of the Third World. It is a concern touching all as we stride down the road of faith, seeking multiple ways of thinking and expressing our spiritual unity of belief.

What should characterize our "rules of thumb"? These norms must reflect authentically the physiological and psychological characteristics of the praying community involved; their historical traditions, endowments, and experiences; their modes of language and expression. The church's transformation should resemble that of the early Hebrew places of prayer and the temple, which resembled the tent structures of a nomadic way of life, into the stones and the cedar of Lebanon's wooden structures, suitable to a more stable form of urban life. The church

should be like the stained-glass windows, murals, mosaics, and statues of medieval times, which served as the books of peoples unable to read.

The application of liturgical principles and actions must reflect the individualistic, diverse characteristics of differing praying communities and their cultures and traditions. We must remain sensitive to the pastoral needs of other cultures. At the same time we must guard against attempts to wed unnatural and contradictory forms to our common spiritualities. Such a process can only be destructive and counterproductive to the maintenance of the unity of our spiritualities. We must remain faithful to the oneness of our faith. Human culture gives special meaning and eminence to human destiny as a means of God revealing Himself to His people—a new mode of evangelization. Although many and diverse in our spiritual and liturgical expressions, we must retain a sense of harmony between and among cultures. We must remain one in our faith, safeguarding the essential elements of Christian teaching and theology, our common heritage. As ours is a living church, this desire for diversity and unity is a continuing renewal, open to and pastorally receptive of emerging spiritual qualities of every age, utilizing these riches and raising them to fruition, fortifying from within, restoring all things in Christ. Only in this way can we bear witness to the transforming message of the Good News to all peoples, in all cultural settings, in all epochs of time. Only in this manner will we become a united yet diverse "witness to the world" (Acts 1:8).



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